

RADICAL FILM CRITICISM AND THEORY


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**MELODRAMA**  
*and the female star*





No. 26/27 1992

## *cine***ACTION**

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Otto Preminger's *Whirlpool*

GENE TIERNEY  
IN MEMORIAM  
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ABOVE: Bette Midler in  
Mark Rydell's *For the Boys*

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Dorothy Malone in Douglas Sirk's  
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# Empowering Glamour

*by Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe*

The rise of the woman's film in the thirties (a generic variation of the melodrama) is dramatically dependent upon the careers of a number of female stars who revolutionize the representation of the heroine in the Hollywood cinema. Greta Garbo pioneers this tradition and is quickly followed by a distinguished group of highly individual star presences including Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford, Katharine Hepburn, Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck, each of whom contributes to the definition of the woman's film. In this essay, we will limit our discussion to two definitive star images, Garbo and Dietrich.

Aimed at a largely female audience, the woman's film developed a set of conventions which can be articulated in terms of the genre's concerns: the films negotiated and dramatised the contradictions of female experience for an audience who responded to the narratives and their female protagonists with a commitment evident not only in box office receipts but also in a response to the proliferation of the star image which includes such diverse elements as movie/currents magazines, fan clubs, styles of dress, codes of behaviour, notions of beauty and fashion. This phenomenon speaks of an interdependent complex of cultural/aesthetic conventions, the star persona, and creative energies that were co-joined under the aegis of the major studios. The stars were a significant investment to the studios, making their popularity and the circulation of their images on and off screen essential to off-setting the inevitable vicissitudes of the box office; to this end, the studios employed and pooled a wide range of innovative and/or notable talents within such areas as cinematography (e.g., Lee Garmes, William Daniels); direction (e.g., Sternberg, Mamoulian); still photography (e.g., Otto Dyar, Eugene Robert Richee, Clarence Bull); costume design (e.g., Travis Banton, Adrian); scriptwriting (e.g., Jules Furthman, Salka Viertel). A highly collaborative effort, and intensified by the umbrella-like organization of the studio, this aspect of the classical Hollywood cinema is often underestimated and overlooked.

The woman's film is dependent upon this creative network, drawn together in the star persona. Stars like Garbo and Dietrich radicalized the possibilities of the heroine. Unlike her predecessors, characterized in the traditions of Pickford and Gish, these women offered an intense sexuality coupled with a distinct awareness of the power of their desires. They connoted a worldly sophistication (clearly the importation of these stars from Europe accentuated this otherness), intelligence and a knowingness in regard to the woman's place in a masculine world. The remarkable change in direction they effected in terms of female representation is underlined by their acceptance as positive figures of identification. Dietrich's appearance in male attire was at first shocking to an American public who were accustomed to more conventional conceptions of gender identity. The image pointed to the repressiveness of gender mores and beyond, to the liberating possibilities of defiance. It suggested radically the mannish lesbian and the articulation of desire beyond the parameters of heterosexuality. Significantly, Garbo and Dietrich were speaking to a predominantly female audience. Dietrich was publicized as the



"woman all women want to see", and if the persona initially shocked it was also liberating. The mannish dress took off as a style which swept across America and this should not be dismissed lightly; it indicates a profound support of the defiance which was crystallized in Dietrich's powerful self-image of nascent protest.

The stars of the thirties and the photographs we present here are often described in terms of *glamour*. Glamour, in turn, has become a problematic site for feminist discussion. Too often theorists contend that it speaks of the fetishized objectification of the woman within representation, epitomizing the appropriation of the woman's body for the gratification of male pleasure. Marxist interpretations of glamour, like the one offered by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (pp. 146-148) suggest that glamour is a capitalist invention used to feed the spectator's envy for a manufactured desire (which is always one step away from fulfillment). We wish to redress this intellectual embarrassment at the notion of glamour, but without recourse to camp. Glamour was important to many of the women's films, to the viewing audience and for a complex of reasons. Glamour perfectly addressed the characteristics for which these stars were greatly admired: it speaks of confidence, empowerment, and, depending on its use, articulates all that is *not* domestic, confined, suppressed. Glamour, above all, is not mundane. It can connote visual transgression by pointing to eroticism, power and wealth which is, after all, denied the woman in order to keep her dependent upon the trajectory of marriage and domesticity. Glamour can be used in this progressive way, in conjunction with certain stars, who control the meaning of or the conditions surrounding glamour. The still images and the personas of Dietrich and Garbo used glamour as a means of visual transgression emblemizing what cannot easily be stated otherwise. The glamour photograph served as a form of advertisement for the film industry, but the pleasure being promised went beyond exploitation; the images acknowledged the desire to see these stars act out identities and situations in ways which extended and substantiated unspoken wishes and desires.

This is essential to the melodrama; it is a genre which can articulate protest and circumvent censorship through visual detail, aesthetic innuendo and a heightened style. Glamour, like crossdressing, can point to and foreground the boundaries within which beauty/aesthetics are culturally confined. It implies a means of breaking down the rigid definitions characteristic of gender norms. We challenge the dismissal of glamour as a form of feminine narcissism, and the argument that glamour keeps women subservient by dictating a form of surface embellishment which will redirect more profound dissatisfaction. The term narcissism has customarily been given negative connotations; one of our aims is to reappropriate and redefine it, as a means of female empowerment. The photographs of these stars, produced primarily to circulate and draw attention to their films, testify to more profound tensions, which they capture. Their power and appeal are the explosive results of the coming together of star, genre and the problems of social experience to which they make reference.

The Hollywood portrait photographs of the thirties, and stars like Garbo and Dietrich who emigrated to Hollywood, evoke a period of high modernism expressed across the arts in photography, architecture and various aspects of functional design including furnishings, jewelry, clothing, poster art, etc. Today they remain as fresh, innovative and vital as they did at the time of their conception. The 'international style,' at its best, broke down the barriers between the avant-garde (radical design for the sophisticated, privileged few) and a diluted commercial style for the mass public; the finest examples reflect the underlying commitment to function without compromising the audacious, innovative aesthetics of the movement.

The photographs that follow belong to the optimism and energy of the period and express the belief that an international style could cross the boundaries of nationhood and contribute to social change through cultural/aesthetic means. This is a complex thesis to argue fully in this article, but is significant in relation to these photographs because they share in the political spirit of this style: the photographs suggest the possibility of redefining gender norms, daring to be bold, and challenging a status quo firmly rooted in patriarchal and class privilege.



In the last twenty years, feminist theory and criticism has been built on the founding premise that popular art exploits the female image and body, objectifying her presence for the male spectator. While the emphasis on the male gaze is relevant, it has established, at times, a too rigid frame of reference. The kinds of pleasure popular culture offers, particularly for the female spectator, range further than this constricting grid. These photographs are about a non-objectified presentation of cultural femininity and evidence that this need not be a contradiction. While we are aware that femininity is a social, hence ideological construction, we suggest that popular culture can visualize the feminine in ways which can be empowering to women. These images project characteristics which include confidence, authority, self-assurance and intelligence. They are direct and unabashedly confrontational. They work to redescribe the feminine without recourse to an ambiguous androgyny. The photographs blend and juxtapose textures more typically aligned with the feminine: softness, an emphasis on the tactile — hair, fur trims, shiny satin-like patinas to lips, fabrics and hair — with those more often typifying masculinity: the leather garments, the masculine shirt and collar, the fisherman boots, the hair hidden in the aviator's headgear or severely held off the face. This results in images which are simultaneously highly sensual and yet aware of the power of the eroticism constructed therein. The women are not offered as possessions to be appropriated; their glamour is transgressive, moving beyond socially-controlled categories of wife/femme fatale/mistress, because they assert they are self-possessed and that they have desires of their own. They initiate a challenge to gender roles, sexual needs and orientations, speaking both to male and female spectators.

There are distinctions to be made in terms of star personas: the Garbo photographs are more geometrical, pared down and less embellished than one finds generally in the Dietrich stills. The Garbo images are more stark and rigorous, but Garbo's gaze is often off-camera, suggesting a sense of yearning and abstraction. This clearly feeds into her larger onscreen persona, where the protagonists she plays fail often to find fulfillment within a bourgeois patriarchal society, making it possible to promote the mystification of the Garbo persona as the unknown other. This is a masculinist response to Garbo's complexity, and reflects a means of defusing her transgressive unwillingness to be satisfied with the roles traditionally offered women. (One can make the same argument regarding the reduction of the Dietrich image to the fetishisation of her legs.)

Dietrich, in contrast, displays a directness and assertive challenge in her gaze which confronts the camera. She is rarely shot in profile, and wears the accoutrements of femininity with a sense of ironic awareness. Dietrich knows her sensuality is powerful and can be used to benefit her needs. Again, this points outward to the body of films released concurrently which in turn reinforce what the photographs proclaim. Dietrich's photographs were often supervised by her director and co-collaborator, Josef von Sternberg, who continued to work with her even after the termination of their filmmaking career at Paramount; hence, the persona developed in the early thirties by Sternberg and Dietrich continued to inform the later evolution of Dietrich's persona in Hollywood. As for Garbo's portrait photography, it is most often thought of in relation to Clarence Bull, "the man who shot Garbo"; his portraiture captures a strongly-defined star persona which preceded their work together. Bull's photographic achievements should not be underestimated; however one cannot claim that he shaped the image in the same intense manner associated with the Sternberg-Dietrich collaborations. Instead, Bull's photographs articulate the complexities of Garbo's strongly defined persona.

The portrait photographs accompanying this essay have been chosen specifically to illustrate the above contentions, but at the same time they are representative of the entire body of portrait photographs of these stars. We hope this project begins to open up the discussion of glamour photography in a way that can acknowledge the extraordinary creativity, power and dynamism captured in these star images. The photographs define the notion of femininity and challenge its confinement within the realm of subjugation and objectification. The pleasure the images offer is intense and authentic in their relation to protest and strength.





MARLENE DIETRICH

*The Scarlet Empress* (1934)

Dietrich's direct gaze confronts the viewer; the image is unabashedly sensual yet knowing and aware. The richly textured composition (the sheen on the lips, the fur hat which is highlighted) creates a tactile surface. The portrait is highly

stylised; the face is lit to look sculpted, foregrounding the painterly aspects of the image. The Russian sable hat, strikingly angled, connotes wealth and power and suggests masculine garb. Combined with the assured gaze, the total effect is one of a powerful eroticism controlled by the subject of the portrait.



GRETA GARBO

*As You Desire Me* (1932)

The photograph embodies a tension between the animation of the cascading hair and the composure of the face. Garbo's image has a tactile quality through the sweeping fullness of the hair which is juxtaposed against the symmetry of

her face producing a dynamism which is striking.

The gaze is decisively away from the viewer and is contemplative. Garbo's expression, calm and controlled, is supported by the pared down clothing: the mannish shirt collar, tie and vest. In total, the image defies gender-typing in the way these various elements are comfortably integrated.





GRETA GARBO

*Anna Christie* (1931)

The image is notably severe and minimalist in its lack of elaboration. The composition is stark and direct: the arms frame the face, the hands cover the hair in its entirety, she is wearing a basic crewneck sweater. Garbo's face is almost without expression, although it

conveys an intensity and sense of concentration. The severity of the image is undercut by the delicacy of the eyes and the slightly upward gaze. The image is audacious in its simplicity, being at once direct and open, without soliciting or inviting a response. Its modern-ness defies the vicissitudes of fashion.



**MARLENE DIETRICH**

*Dishonored* (1931)

Dietrich presents an alternative to conventional glamour explicitly appropriating masculine accoutrements without invoking a fetishisation of the body. The bold full frontal positioning, hands in trouser pockets, the direct gaze, together present an image which is relaxed and in control. The

leather aviatrix uniform suggests masculine privilege: adventure, wanderlust, exploration and all that is not domestic. The textures are soft and comfortable; the face is less sculptured than usual, the hair starkly removed. The encased body melds with the darkened background providing an other-worldly sensibility.





GRETA GARBO  
*Anna Christie* (1931)

The image is strongly architectural, using the wall and various planes in the composition to frame the figure which is equally unadorned. Like the Dietrich portrait in leather, this image draws on male attire — the Mackintosh and cap, the Wellington boots, the simple knit scarf atop the crewneck sweater —

which seems appropriate and suitable. This works to undermine typical gender distinctions: it is not fetishistic and does not foreground itself as out of place. More typical to Garbo is the upward gaze and the body leaning single-handedly against the wall. The stance, classically more related to the feminine, tones down the stark severity of the image, striking a balance between the woman and her surroundings.



GRETA GARBO

*Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (1931)

This portrait still from *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* is less typical than other Garbo portrait stills in its emphasis on the erotic and on almost excessive femininity, evidenced in the lamé coat, the open neckline, the fullness and waves in her hair. Darkened shadows frame the face, echoing

the waves in her hair. The shadowing and a series of diagonal lines created through the positioning of the head and the hands produce a highly dramatic image. The head tilted back, the hands positioned on the bare chest, add to the eroticism. At the same time, the image is classically Garbo in the expression of serenity and controlled self-assurance.





# MARLENE DIETRICH

unidentified publicity still

Dietrich, in this portrait still, epitomizes glamour. The composition is provocative and seductive. Costume: the bared shoulder, the black ornate gown replete with tulle and netting; makeup: the familiar shadowed face but softened features, the shiny glow on the eyes and lips; stance: the classic Dietrich pose, hand on hip, the bare arm resting against a table; and mise-en-scène: the

vertical soft shafts of light which frame the figure and lighten the hair. The vertical panels of diffuse lighting contrast the curves in the dark dress and body and the deep shadow beneath the chin. In its totality, the image speaks of luxury, elegance and sophistication. Dietrich, once again, expresses her sense of control, ease and pleasure. The image evidences the star's confidence; she is relaxed within her environment and seems to possess the space around her. It is an empowering image.

# GRETA GARBO

## The Star Image

### A CORRECTIVE READING

This is the second installment of a 3-part article. The first installment appeared in *CineAction*, No. 21/22, Summer/Fall 1990.



*Inspiration*, 1931

FACING PAGE: On the set of Ernst Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* (1939)

by Richard Lippe

Before discussing the two films Cukor and Garbo made together, *Camille* (1936), and *Two-Faced Woman* (1941), I want briefly to discuss why I am writing on this particular collaboration; as I previously mentioned, Cukor is very much a collaborative artist and it would be possible to deal with this aspect of his career from various perspectives. For instance, in interviews, Cukor has acknowledged on many occasions his debt to the contributions of colour consultant George Hoyningen-Huene and art director Gene Allen.<sup>1</sup> And, although there has been less comment from Cukor and/or his critics about the possible significance of the producer-director relationship, it would not be inappropriate to investigate the 30s films in relation to his involvement with David O. Selznick. But, undoubtedly, the most celebrated collaboration occurs between 1947 and 1954 and involves the seven films written by the husband and wife team of Garson Kanin and Ruth Gordon. Much has been written about the Cukor-Kanin-Gordon films and for many critics these films, particularly *Adam's Rib* and *Pat and Mike*, are considered to represent Cukor at his most progressive in the handling of sex-gender issues. On the one hand, the collaboration between Cukor and the Kanins is striking for several reasons: the concentration, the length and the fact that there is no

1. For example, see "Conversation with George Cukor," interviewed by Gillett, John and David Robinson. *Sight and Sound*, Autumn, 1964. pp. 188-193.









Garbo gives an interview — aboard the *Kungsholm*, 1938

equivalent to the relationship elsewhere in his career. On the other hand, Cukor has used their collaboration in interviews to disqualify himself as an auteur claiming that the films were highly interdependent projects which involved, in some instances, screenplay contributions from the actors. Although I think that these films are of considerable interest, particularly *The Marrying Kind* and *The Actress*, both of which are more challenging than they have been given credit for being, I do not want to concentrate primarily on Cukor's relationship with his writers. Rather, my concern in regard to Cukor and collaboration is centred on the director-actor interaction and his creative usage of the star persona; as such, the most obvious choice in this area would appear to be a discussion of his work with Katharine Hepburn, given their ten-film partnership. But I have decided against dealing with the Hepburn star image/persona and the Cukor-Hepburn films because I think Andrew Britton's reading of the Hepburn image/persona is a remarkably incisive and expansive piece of theoretical and critical analysis.<sup>2</sup> While Britton doesn't discuss the

Hepburn films Cukor directed as reflecting his participation, I don't think that his reading of the image/persona and the films would be significantly different if Cukor's involvement was given fuller recognition. As I said earlier, although Cukor repeatedly assisted Hepburn in developing various inflections of her image/persona, he wasn't responsible for its basic construction which was produced, as is the case with the construction of most star images, by a complex of factors intersecting in a specific instance. On the other hand, there is no question at all of Cukor's hand in the moulding of the Garbo image/persona which antedates their collaboration and is most frequently attributed to the Swedish director Mauritz Stiller who has been accredited with being as influential in the construction of Garbo's screen identity as was Sternberg in that of Dietrich's. While many critics in discussing Garbo's films have acknowledged in passing that *Camille* is one of her more sensitively directed films, it is perhaps the fact that

2. Britton, Andrew, *Katharine Hepburn: The Thirties and After*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Tyneside Cinema, 1984.



Cukor directed the almost totally despised *Two-Faced Woman* that has received the greater attention, frequently as a means to make disparaging remarks about Cukor's alleged skills as a women's director.

While I want to comment on Garbo and her films before looking at the Cukor projects, I do not intend to offer an extensive analysis of her image/persona. Of the major classical Hollywood female stars, Garbo has received the least attention within contemporary critical writing. This is ironic in that Garbo is arguably the quintessential star produced by the studio-genre-star system. On the other hand, there are, I think, several reasons why Garbo has been ignored. To begin, despite the attention directed to Richard Dyer's book *Stars*<sup>3</sup> and his argument that stars be given serious critical analysis because of the ideological implications the star image embodies, this area has still to receive the intensive study it deserves. In regard to female stars, an area that feminist film critics have shown some interest in, the dominant tendency has been to investigate star images to the extent that the particular image addresses a specific women's issue — for instance, Joan Crawford's persona has been important because of *Mildred Pierce* and the Bette Davis persona in relation to female rebellion. And, aside from the continual, long standing preoccupation with Marilyn Monroe and the various readings her persona provides, the actress who has probably most engaged feminist and cultural critics has been Marlene Dietrich and specifically the images she embodies in the 30s Sternberg films.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the interest in the Dietrich persona is tied closely to these films which are now often considered to be very much the result of a strong collaboration between the director and the star. The Sternberg films without Dietrich have failed to generate a strong interest from present day critics as these films are lacking when compared to the extraordinary portraits of a woman's identity and her options for survival found in the Dietrich films. Dietrich's persona is understandably highly appealing to the contemporary feminist viewer: Dietrich resists objectification by calling attention to the artifice in the construction of the image without disrupting the image's sex appeal; she manages to assert her sexual desires and refuses to subordinate herself to those of the male; she's intelligent, ironic and street smart. Whereas there has been recently a substantial recognition of the Dietrich persona and its progressive aspects, the Garbo persona remains virtually untouched by such political concerns. To a degree, there is perhaps a practical element involved in why this has occurred: until Garbo's death in 1990 and MGM's subsequent release of a series of her films on video many of Garbo's films weren't easily available. On the other hand, the tendency to ignore Garbo's work cannot be attributed simply to the critics' inability to see her films. The more probable reasons as to why the Garbo persona hasn't been given much critical investigation are to be found in other areas: 1) it has been generally conceded that, despite the impact of Stiller on the early stages of her career, Garbo's films are star vehicles having a minimal value without Garbo's presence. Unlike Dietrich, Garbo never developed a constant working relationship with a director who is regarded as having a distinctive sensibility. Although Garbo worked regularly with various creative talents (e.g., William Daniels photographed twenty of her twenty-four

films; Salka Viertel developed projects for Garbo and co-authored four Garbo screenplays; until his death in 1936, Irving Thalberg was the executive producer of her films), none of these people has been accorded by the critics a privileged position in the construction of the films. Consequently, the Garbo persona has been restricted to films which aren't considered worthy of serious critical attention. In addition to the fact that her films aren't supposedly of particular interest in regard to directorial input, the films were often dismissed at the time of their release by male critics, many of whom considered the melodrama as being a less than respectable genre. In the present day, despite the wide-spread interest in the genre, Garbo's films haven't attracted much attention being marginal to the generic concerns most often taken up by feminists such as motherhood, the bourgeois family, the *femme fatale*; 2) because of the films, the Garbo persona is very strongly connected to the concept of romantic love which associates the woman with suffering, victimization and death. Arguably, in popular memory, Garbo, despite those aspects of her persona (e.g., gender ambiguity, independence) that make her of contemporary interest, is aligned primarily to a nineteenth century notion of the worldly woman; 3) like the construction of other major star images, but perhaps even more highly so, Garbo's is remarkably complex, combining elements that partake both of her on and off screen imaging. In particular, the Garbo persona manages to project what are considered extremely contradictory traits within a single characterization. For instance, in *Anna Karenina*, Garbo is capable of embodying both the maternal and the erotic woman; on and off the screen, Garbo displays physical and psychical traits that signal gender ambiguity; on screen Garbo's presence is open, direct and emotionally giving whereas the off-screen Garbo is characterized as secretive, elusive and cool; until the late stages of her career, Garbo and her films are reportedly referred to in terms such as weary, sombre, woebegone and yet Garbo often employs wit and irony on and off the screen; Garbo's 'eccentric' behaviour e.g., the early retirement, the nearly 50 years silence, etc., has become synonymous with a definition of her persona.

Although there are numerous reasons as to why the Garbo persona deserves a reconsideration, including the ways in which she both fulfils and complicates and/or undermines the concept of classical Hollywood stardom, it remains the case that there is a tendency among critics to suggest that Kenneth Tynan and Roland Barthes have already said it all. The opening sentence of Tynan's "Garbo" piece,<sup>5</sup> "What, when drunk, one sees in other women, one sees in Garbo sober." or, in the more academic circles, Barthes' "The Face of Garbo"<sup>6</sup> essay has come to serve as definitive commentary. Yet, the introductory statement aside, Tynan's tribute to Garbo has received scant attention. Although he raises the

3. Dyer, Richard, *Stars*, London: British Film Institute, 1979.

4. I am thinking of female stars strongly identified with the Hollywood cinema; recently Madonna's star image has provoked a lot of analysis by cultural studies critics.

5. Tynan, Kenneth, "Garbo", *Sight and Sound*, April-June, 1954. pp. 187-190, 220.

6. Barthes, Roland, "The Face of Garbo", *Mythologies*, London: Paladin, 1989. pp. 62-64.



question of Garbo's sex-gender orientation, his response, as the piece's opening accolade indicates, is to confirm and celebrate her identity as being female/heterosexual/feminine. Interestingly, in the concluding paragraphs of "Garbo", Tynan's rhapsodic reaction to her becomes highly qualified:

Garbo, it turns out, hasn't proven to her audiences that she is a great actress and, abruptly, she is reduced in stature; Tynan offers no criterion to evaluate film acting but, instead, chastises Garbo for not attempting the great roles e.g., Hedda, St. Joan, etc. In his eloquent but cryptic essay, Barthes, too, raises the issue of Garbo's sex identity but he goes on to claim that while the Garbo face 'is almost sexually undefined' there is nevertheless no doubt about her being female. Whereas Tynan is concerned specifically in defining Garbo and her persona, Barthes in a more ambitious effort employs a meditation on Garbo's face to address the evolution of the cinema and its social function. Barthes, in aligning Garbo to Valentino and Chaplin, is connecting her and these two stars to the silent cinema; seemingly, his contention is that Garbo, Valentino and Chaplin in their respective ways epitomize the early period of the cinema which produced 'a sort of Platonic Idea' and which contrasts to the present day cinema which exists solely to celebrate the human being as an 'individual' social presence.

Although both of these pieces are provocative, they have acquired reputations that outstrip their content. Tynan's piece is, in particular, representative of a certain type of male critical writing on Garbo; more precisely, I am thinking of celebratory works which are, as Andrew Britton points out in his Hepburn book, concerned with a Romantic notion of the woman as 'la divine'; Britton suggests the 'la divine' figure serves as a 'male muse' who provides the male poet with inspiration. Parker Tyler's well-known essay, "The Garbo Image"<sup>7</sup> belongs very much to this tradition.

As I mentioned earlier, feminist film critics haven't shown much interest in Garbo and her films but, when she is discussed, Garbo is often judged harshly because she purportedly emblemized the concept of romantic love in the 30s Hollywood cinema. For instance, in *From Reverence to Rape*,<sup>8</sup> Molly Haskell, while not totally unappreciative of Garbo, tends to depict her image in terms suggesting that it is severely limited when considered from a feminist perspective. On the one hand, Haskell says that women liked Garbo because she was romantic/spiritual more than sexual/physical; on the other, it is this aspect of her persona that Haskell finds troublesome. Referring to Garbo as 'the woman who lived for love...', Haskell's haltingly appreciative attitude toward the Garbo persona is defined in the following remark: "Garbo's body may have belonged to the twenties, but her heart was already yearning for the thirties. She belonged, for better or worse, to the alchemies being wrought by changing



Robert Z. Leonard's *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* (1931) with Clark Gable.



tastes and by the Production Code — to the magic, or the hypocrisy, by which body would be converted into spirit, lust into love, sexuality into romance." (p. 89).

In discussing the Garbo image, Haskell repeatedly associates her with such notions as 'absolute love' and 'eternal love' and at one point says Garbo existed as 'love's embodiment'. Haskell's discomfort with Garbo seems to be that she projected an ideal or fantasy image that ignored the realities of a social, physical existence and, accordingly, produced a female image that allows for male appropriation; instead, Haskell offers the Dietrich image which she finds much more substantial and, in part, because the images of the women Dietrich portrayed in the Sternberg films were given a concrete definition through his mise-en-scène. In her reading, the Sternberg/Dietrich collaboration produces a subversive female image that is highly complex in its deployment of feminine and masculine gender traits and challenges sexist notions of what a woman can be. Although Haskell refers to Garbo as a great androgyne, she thinks that Garbo's identity is transcendent and that of the goddess — i.e., 'the divine'. Not surprisingly, Haskell's evaluation of Garbo's appeal culminates in her resort to a male critic: 'Garbo asked for "eternal love," a fairy-tale phrase; Dietrich asked for something far more difficult: love now, today. Dietrich's irony kept men at a distance, posed questions, and signalled her intelligence; Garbo's was conspiratorial, secret — it darkened the room, excluded the world, and drew men, flattering them, deep into the womb of her mystery. And they emerged dissatisfied with the rest of womankind, to write epigrams like Kenneth Tynan's: "What one sees in other women drunk, one sees in Garbo sober." Perhaps if men were less concerned with women's faces than with their souls and minds, they wouldn't have to drown their disappointment in drink, real or metaphysical.' (p. 107).

Haskell responds with insight and sensitivity to the Dietrich image (and, undoubtedly, face) and I don't take issue with the claims she makes for the extraordinary challenge the Sternberg/Dietrich films entail and particularly so in their conception and presentation of Dietrich herself. On the other hand, I think Haskell displays no real interest in the Garbo persona. She tends to repeat and, hence, re-inforce the Garbo myth as it exists in popular memory. Haskell isn't claiming to offer an in-depth discussion and her comments are meant to be taken as something like a distillation of the star's image; but, as so often happens in Garbo evaluations, Haskell dismisses the films as being more or less irrelevant as Garbo didn't work with many top-notch directors or with strong material. While it is the case that Garbo wasn't given generally the directors and materials she deserved, it nevertheless becomes a disservice to her to detach Garbo from the films. In doing so, Garbo becomes the abstract that Haskell purports her to be: Garbo = face = beauty = romance = spirituality.

7. Tyler, Parker, "The Garbo Image" in *The Films of Greta Garbo*, compiled by Conway, Michael, Dion McGregor and Mark Ricci. New York: The Citadel Press, 1963. pp. 9-31.

8. Haskell, Molly, *From Reverence to Rape*. New York: Penguin Books Inc., 1974.

9. Matthews, Peter, "Garbo and Phallic Motherhood: A 'Homosexual' Visual Economy," *Screen*, Summer, 1988, pp. 15-39.

Although Haskell is aware of the abstract she offers and stresses that Dietrich, unlike Garbo, is anchored in the Sternberg films in the 'real,' she is content to leave it as such; similarly, Haskell, in the quotation above, seems to suggest that it isn't Tynan but rather Garbo who is doing the myth-making — Tynan is, as are men in her films, Garbo's conspiratorial victim in her hallucinatory romantics. While Haskell sees Garbo as capable of possessing a slight degree of irony about her image, she doesn't allow for more as that would disrupt the Garbo image she has taken over from sexist male critics.

Haskell's comments on Garbo's screen persona indicate that she is uncomfortable with and wants to dissociate herself from what she perceives to be the star's unbridled celebration of romantic love; traditionally, women's association with the concept carries 'negative' connotations, e.g., emotionalism, passivity, self-centredness, masochism. In a more recent, in-depth and highly ambitious article, "Garbo and Phallic Motherhood: A 'Homosexual' Visual Economy",<sup>9</sup> Peter Matthews takes an alternative approach to Garbo's image: relying heavily on Laura Mulvey's work and particularly her usage of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and Freud's "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood", Matthews argues that several of Garbo's 30s melodramas are highly appealing and significant to heterosexual women and gays because in these films Garbo enacts the myth of the phallic mother. In Matthews' reading, *Queen Christina*, *Anna Karenina* and *Camille* offer, "...variations on the Freudian triangle of the remote or absent father, the passionate, repressed mother, and the 'compensatory' son." (p. 27); essentially, in these films, Garbo and her 'child'/lover develop a pre-Oedipal bonding in which Garbo offers total gratification because she is both erotic/sensual and maternal, masculine/feminine in disposition, and makes the father figure unnecessary. Accordingly, in Lacanian terms, Garbo, through the lover relationship, provides the viewer with the experience of the 'imaginary' but, as the film and the viewer exist within the 'symbolic', the film must dethrone Garbo and reinstate the father/patriarchy. While Matthews doesn't challenge Mulvey's notion that the classical cinema is constructed on the male gaze, he suggests that viewer identification is problematized by the female star presence. And, referring to Mulvey's "Notes on Sirk and the Melodrama," he contends that the melodrama/the woman's film, although recuperable, functions to "...address a feminine subject and engage a feminine point of view in a viewing space not governed by the male gaze — one therefore appropriable as a site of castration." (p. 18).

Although I find the Matthews article refreshing in that he argues for a progressive reading of the Garbo image, I have difficulty with a number of issues he raises. Aside from the problems inherent in Mulvey's strictly Lacanian interpretation of the viewing experience, the difficulty includes that Matthews, who identifies himself as gay, makes the assumption that Garbo has been strongly embraced by gays and lesbians.

I don't think Garbo can be considered a gay icon; at least, not in the way that the image/persona of Judy Garland, Mae West, Bette Davis, Dietrich and even Katharine Hepburn have



been incorporated into gay culture. While Garbo's image is highly stylized, she doesn't, for instance, call attention to artifice in the way Dietrich does nor does she employ mannerisms, as Davis does, that suggest a caricaturing of the feminine. And conceivably, Garbo holds a greater appeal for lesbians than she would for gay men. The often repeated 'I shall die a bachelor!' line from *Queen Christina* and Garbo's cross-dressing in the film are probably most fully appreciated by a lesbian viewer. In addition to suggesting that gay male viewers see themselves in Garbo's young men in her films, Matthews proposes another area of identification — in discussing a gay man's recollection of his response and reaction to a Susan Hayward film *My Foolish Heart*, Matthews says "...the camp identification with women stars as 'emotional subjects' — in 'wet' fantasy scenarios that decentre heterosexual male self-assertion in favour of feminine self-transcendence, secret passion and silent suffering — has traditionally afforded gay men an outlet for our own publicly denied sexual feelings." (p. 26). Disregarding the reference to 'camp' and what the term signifies in this instance, the statement seems to imply that the gay viewer identifies more strongly with the position the woman is placed in because of generic demands than with the female star. And, also, are there any female stars who don't qualify as 'emotional subjects'? In any case, I don't see that Matthews convincingly demonstrates that Garbo solicits gay male identification to the extent he claims.

Just as Matthews depends on the reader's acceptance that Garbo is a gay icon, the argument he mounts seems to suggest that Freud's theoretical assumptions concerning Leonardo da Vinci's homosexuality are widely accepted as a conclusive account of the origins of male homosexual desire.

In discussing Garbo's career, Matthews says "But it is well known that as the thirties wore on, her increasingly austere figure, enshrined in the series of expensive costume melodramas (*Queen Christina* [1933], *Anna Karenina* [1935], *Camille* [1936], *Marie Walewska* [1937]) that sealed her legend, was discovered to be 'box-office poison', appealing mainly to women — who responded empathetically to her tragic composure in ritual suffering and renunciation — and to the ever loyal European market." (p. 19). What Matthews is seeking specifically to establish is that Garbo was abandoned allegedly by the heterosexual male viewer during this period and he offers several reasons as to why this occurred: 1) in the early films, Garbo played the *femme fatale* projecting an 'exotic sexuality' but, by the mid 30s, she combined the erotic and the maternal; 2) Garbo became identified with the melodrama, a genre focusing on subject matter which doesn't readily appease the sex-gender insecurities of the post-Oedipal male; 3) playing out the phallic mother fantasy, Garbo's melodramas threatened the male by evoking within the unconscious a pre-Oedipal memory. While it seems more than highly likely that Garbo's 30s audience was predominantly female (the reasons for this may in varying degrees fulfil Matthews' schema), I question the assertion that heterosexual men ceased to be engaged by the image — after all, the Garbo 'myth', which was fully in the process of construction in the 30s, has been largely written and sustained by ostensibly heterosexual men. And, I think it is somewhat misleading to mention that Garbo was labelled 'box-office poison' and ignore that Hepburn,

Dietrich and Joan Crawford among the female stars were similarly identified during the latter half of the 30s. Like Garbo, these stars had established screen personas that provided challenges to the patriarchal order; is it to be assumed that male viewer rejection accounts for their faltering careers, too? Also, does the 'ever loyal European market' include men and, if so, why?

In addition to the above reservations I have about certain claims Matthews makes, I don't think that his psychoanalytic reading of her image and several of the films extends what has been already said about Garbo, e.g., she's capable of displaying both the erotic and the maternal, many of the films employ the Freudian triangle, etc. Finally, Matthews, despite the phallic mother emphasis, seems to be offering another application of the Raymond Bellour notion that all Hollywood narratives enact the male Oedipal scenario of the man's entry into the 'symbolic' order. I find that his article is valuable in its consideration of her image and female transgression and, also, in the connections he makes between Garbo's melodramas and the concept of romantic love which, as championed by the Surrealists in its manifestation as *l'amour fou*, has subversive connotations even if recuperation occurs. The article opens a space to view Garbo and her films from a feminist perspective which isn't blocked by a fear that the critic will be seen as endorsing romantic love.

Robin Wood's *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*<sup>10</sup> contains a chapter entitled 'Star and Auteur: Hitchcock's Films with Bergman'; in his discussion of the formation of Ingrid Bergman's star image/persona in the Hollywood of the late 30s, Wood suggests that Bergman was intended to be a replacement for two earlier European imports, Garbo and Dietrich, who were having career problems. Offering both a succinct definition of their respective star images and a critical commentary, Wood says, 'Despite the actual complexities of their personas, Dietrich and Garbo were popularly defined in terms of "glamour", representing different inflections of the concept of "screen goddess": the Garbo mythology emphasized her aloofness ("I want to be alone"), the Dietrich mythology her exoticism. Both mythologies developed a feminine mystique, woman as inaccessible, mysterious, irreducibly "other" while irresistibly desirable: the mystique essential to our culture's particular inflection of romantic love...' (p. 311). I am interested particularly in the connection Wood makes between the Garbo mythology — aloofness — and a feminine mystique — otherness/desirability. In writings on Garbo, she is again and again referred to in terms that set her apart e.g., 'la divine', the sphinx, spiritual, austere, etc.; and, although the Garbo image was constructed along lines that encouraged such a reading, the success of the enterprise depended upon a public and critical acceptance of her 'otherness'. Yet, if Garbo as an emblematic image of woman as mystery has held great appeal, the concept has produced, conversely, a desire to demystify Garbo and strip her of the power the image gives her; and, particularly so, when it became evident that she was adamant about her retirement and refused to exploit herself through a public revelation of personal intimacies. That Garbo's insistence on her right to

10. Wood, Robin, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.



privacy has generated a considerable amount of animus through the years was illustrated in the responses to her identity when she died. Although her death was accorded mass-media attention, there wasn't any serious attempt, as far as I know, to give a critical account of either Garbo's creative contribution to the classical cinema or the complexities of her image/persona and its relation to women and film. For example, as a tribute, Robert Horton's *Film Comment* essay,<sup>11</sup> "The Mysterious Lady", is, as the title suggests, highly predictable including the "But could Garbo act?" issue. Nevertheless, Horton treats Garbo with dignity. In contrast, there is the Michael Gross article in *New York Magazine*<sup>12</sup> "Garbo's Last Days", which purports to offer the reader a portrait of the 'real' Garbo. Gross begins his investigative piece by referring to the sensationalistic headlines that announced Garbo's death, e.g., "Garbo's Last Dark Days, screamed a headline in the *Daily News*, over tales of 'Booze, butts [and] hazy nights' as told by 'a source familiar with Garbo's life.'" Presumably, Gross is attempting to disassociate his work from lurid reportage; this is a dishonest ploy as the article is simply providing a more classy version of the gossip and dubious 'facts' Gross professes to counter. Gross' article, like much of what has been reported about and written on Garbo, is highly misogynist. But, of course, in numerous ways, Garbo has transgressed and she's being taken to task for it now. If Garbo had repented — admitted she was lonely, regretted her 'mistakes' — she would have been given, in contemporary parlance, a kinder, gentler treatment.

As both the mainstream press and intellectuals/academics have continued uncritically to define Garbo in relation to romantic love and reinforce the image of her as the 'mysterious lady,' it isn't surprising that 'the Garbo myth' has become increasingly reductive.

In the points listed below, I would like to offer several observations that might be helpful in a revaluation of Garbo's image/persona.

1. Garbo is described unfailingly as being 'aloof', 'austere', etc. The description has been applied indiscriminately to both her on- and off-screen identity; but while the off-screen Garbo was inaccessible, her on-screen identity cannot be characterized predominantly as such. In fact, although certain aspects of the on-screen Garbo, e.g., her beauty, discipline and innate reserve, would suggest seemingly an unapproachable presence, she is, almost invariably, an identification figure for the viewer. In many of her films, including the Cukor projects, Garbo is exceedingly sympathetic and vulnerable projecting a direct expression of her feelings and physical desires but without denying her intelligence, integrity and fortitude. The close-up shot is used often to capture Garbo's ability to register simultaneously the mental and emotional responses she has to a given situation. The close-up is also a device providing the viewer with a privileged and intimate relation to the star, hence functioning to build a bond between the two. Also, and again as in the Cukor films, the viewer is aligned primarily with Garbo's position in regard to the events within the film's narrative. For instance, in *Camille*, in the scene in which Garbo renounces Robert Taylor because she fears their relationship will destroy his future, the viewer more fully identi-

fies with Garbo's anguish than with Taylor's distress; in part, this occurs because the viewer, unlike Taylor, knows what immediately precedes the action but, more importantly, because the film, through its mise-en-scène and unfolding of the narrative, has placed us in numerous situations that encourage an intimacy with Garbo, her perceptions and responses. Along these lines, it is worth noting that Garbo's films from relatively early on are very much centred on her persona/presence/characterization and frequently produce a quite extraordinary interaction with her. Garbo, like Dietrich, although arguably the less accessible presence of the two, often plays a woman who transgresses the patriarchal order: that she is an identification figure tends to encourage in the viewer a supporting of female transgression. (Mae West and Jean Harlow, also highly transgressive stars, use comedy to negotiate their rebellious behaviour — the comic mode allows for a greater opportunity to play with transgressive possibilities, but ultimately the mode may defuse the threat of female defiance.)

Perhaps it is because the Garbo myth ("I want to be alone") has been so totally embraced by the public and the critics alike that there is no longer an interest in or awareness of the contradiction between the off- and on-screen Garbo image.

2. Along with the 30s Dietrich and Hepburn, Garbo is invariably referred to as being an androgynous filmic presence, with *Queen Christina* offered as a definitive illustration of an on-screen image of a 'male' Garbo. But, as with the issue of Garbo being aloof, I think that there is a crucial discrepancy between what is claimed and what occurs on the screen. Although she was known to reject a conventionally feminine image off-screen, shunning, for instance, attention and glamour, Garbo is essentially a feminine presence in her films. As Jane Gaines points out in her piece on *Queen Christina*,<sup>13</sup> Garbo's films are centred on heterosexual love and relations; furthermore, Garbo, despite certain 'male' physical attributes (e.g., her broad shoulders, flat chest, big-boned body) is consistently presented in feminine terms in her films; lighting, clothing, make-up, etc., are used to glamorize and reinforce her beauty. In *Queen Christina*, the male outfits Adrian designed for her do not detract from her allure and, if anything, the various shirts and hats she wears serve to emphasize her exquisite facial features. Similarly, the occasional brusque remark or broad gesture the 'masculine' Garbo makes in the film isn't sufficient to undermine her identity as female star/presence. As a project, *Queen Christina* has much in common with the later *Ninotchka* in that it also is built on a movement toward the moment when Garbo fully reveals her feminine self.

I am not concerned so much with contesting the association between Garbo and androgyny; on the other hand, I think the emphasis on the androgynous image has lessened consideration of her projection of a strong degree of sexual

11. Horton, Robert, "The Mysterious Lady," *Film Comment*, July-August, 1990, pp. 30-32.

12. Gross, Michael, "Garbo's Last Days," *New York Magazine*, May 21, 1990, pp. 38-46.

13. Gaines, Jane "The *Queen Christina* Tie-Ups: Convergence of Show Window and Screen," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Volume 11/Number 1, 1989, pp. 35-60.



ambiguity, a potentially more intriguing and radical aspect of her sex-gender identity. Garbo, again, like Dietrich, is fascinating in her ability to maintain a highly feminine persona while expressing characteristics that have been traditionally thought of as masculine in nature. Not only in *Queen Christina*, but in almost everything she appears in, Garbo conveys numerous qualities, in addition to others already mentioned (idealism, the ability to reason), that women aren't supposed to possess. Garbo, in effect, extends the concept of what a woman can be without having to masculinize herself — she neither oppresses herself or others. It is this complex combination of internal elements that needs to be considered when discussing Garbo and her relation to the concept of romantic love.

3. With a few exceptions (*Grand Hotel*, *Queen Christina*, *Camille* and *Ninotchka*) Garbo's films are usually dismissed by most critics as being unworthy of her talent. While a number of the films are undistinguished, it is, I think, a mistake to perceive these films simply as projects lacking any interest outside of Garbo's presence. Outside of Gouling, Cukor and Lubitsch, Garbo wasn't given the opportunity to work with highly talented directors; nevertheless, she managed, in a film as crudely conceived as Robert Z. Leonard's *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise*, to personalize the material in a manner that is similar to the collaborative work done by Sternberg and Dietrich. In fact, as a melodrama, *Susan Lenox* contains elements of both *Morocco* and *Blonde Venus*; as in *Morocco*, Garbo's Susan Lenox makes a commitment to her lover that withstands his inability to trust and, as in *Blonde Venus*, Susan Lenox, after being rejected by her lover, experiences a physical/moral descent which temporarily hardens her emotionally. In comparison to the two Sternberg films, *Susan Lenox* lacks a critical perspective on the material to fully articulate the film's potentially complex thematic concerns regarding its heroine's refusal to be destroyed by the dictates of a masculine social and moral order.

Despite the fact that both the film's direction and script are geared toward a schematic and broad presentation, Garbo manages convincingly to delineate Susan Lenox's gradual development to the point where she embodies a moral and ethical integrity that is unshakable. As enacted by Garbo, Susan Lenox is depicted as a woman who manages to succeed in self-definition despite the almost insurmountable odds against her doing so. With a film like *Susan Lenox* it becomes particularly striking that Garbo without strong support is able to construct and make accessible a heroine who challenges the notions about what constitutes a woman's image in the Hollywood cinema. Or, to take another example, Clarence Brown's *Inspiration*, which has been given probably even less attention than *Susan Lenox*, casts Garbo in a role that foreshadows *Camille*; additionally, as a melodrama, the film is concerned expressly with the interconnections between bourgeois-patriarchal values and women's physical and emotional exploitation. *Inspiration* isn't more than a competent piece of filmmaking but, again, the film is both generically interesting and provides another illustration of Garbo's unerring creative instincts.

In *Inspiration*, as in her other films, Garbo responds with insight and sensitivity to the dramatic and psychosocial

implications of the material. Arguably, there isn't a Garbo film in which she doesn't display a complete commitment to the project's thematic; and, similarly, I don't think that there is a film in which she gives a performance lacking in focus and concentration. While it is unfortunate that Garbo didn't work more often with directors more attuned to her and the film's concerns, she produced, nevertheless, a body of work that on an individual basis deserves more attention than it has been given.

4. Garbo's image encompasses the connection between her and romantic love on-screen and the off-screen association with aloofness and retreat; what isn't so easily accommodated into the image is that Garbo held both creative and financial control within the industry. According to Alexander Walker in his MGM-authorized book, *Garbo*,<sup>14</sup> the star, in 1932 signed a contract with the studio that, in addition to giving her approval of scripts, directors, leading men, etc., gave her permission to organize a personal production company. Walker says the contract was kept secret and that he is, in fact, the first person to reveal publicly the contents of the agreement; the contract was, he says, "...probably unprecedented in the history of MGM, a studio with a reputation for paying its stars their worth (that 'worth' being capable of adjustment under pressure), but not otherwise giving them access to other means of profit or independence". (p. 32). Aside from placing Garbo closer to the contemporary star who has a greater control over his or her image than did the stars of classical Hollywood, this aspect of Garbo's career is of interest in that it provides a perspective which indicates that she was an astute business person.<sup>15</sup>

5. As a performer, Garbo has an intense concentration on what she's doing which works to enhance the viewer's perception that the character she is playing is fully aware of and committed to her ideals and values; and, additionally, she is capable of soliciting a very strong viewer identification through a direct expression of her character's emotional experience. On the other hand, she is particularly adept, as she is in *Camille*, for instance, in using irony to communicate that her character perceives the contradictions and irresolvable problems she confronts in an attempt to live for a romantic love relationship. But, in Garbo's films, irony doesn't exist on numerous levels as it does in the Sternberg/Dietrich films in which the concept dominates the entire project (*Morocco*, an exception) and calls attention to itself and to the critical distance the director and actress are maintaining from the material and its ideological connotations. In general, with Garbo, the film itself isn't ironic in its overall treatment of the subject matter; rather, irony, when it exists, is found in her perfor-

14. Walker, Alexander, *Garbo*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1980.

15. Like other stars who have gained control over the direction of their careers, Garbo had lapses in her critical judgment. For instance, her favourite director was Clarence Brown who guided her through seven films. Most likely, Garbo found Brown sympathetic to her performances; that his films lacked a strong overall conception seems to have escaped her.

Presumably, on the basis of the project's literary prestige Garbo chose to do *Anna Karenina* (with Brown) over doing *Dark Victory*. Not dissimilarly, Ingrid Bergman valued *Joan of Arc* and *Anastasia* over her work with McCarey and Hitchcock.





Robert Montgomery and Garbo: Clarence Brown's *Inspiration* (1931)

mance. As a result, Garbo's films can be read as being partially critical of the ideals her characters embody and, at the same time, the films can be read as endorsing those ideals.

I felt it was necessary to discuss Garbo's image/presence in some detail before passing onto the Cukor/Garbo films because the image/presence is highly relevant to my reading of the two films. Additionally, I wanted to establish a context in which the collaboration can be seen as a genuinely shared effort. As I have mentioned previously, Cukor wasn't instrumental in shaping Garbo's image and, furthermore, the romantic love thematic isn't a pronounced aspect of his work. Nevertheless, Cukor is a director ideally suited to Garbo and it is unfortunate that their professional relationship ended with the negative reaction which greeted *Two-Faced Woman*. For one thing, Cukor, whose work repeatedly shows his trust in his actors, was appreciative of and sensitive to Garbo's artistry and encouraged her to be as self-expressive as possible. For instance, of their working relations on *Camille*, Cukor, elaborating on Gavin Lambert's questioning<sup>16</sup> in regard to the film's last scene, says: "Another scene that was very tricky is when Armand's father comes to see her, and she agrees to give Armand up. It's when the conventions of the play show through most nakedly — but Garbo humanized it. And she did something on her own, you know, after the father left. She sank slowly to her knees and put her arms on the

table...She often did unexpected things." (p. 114); and in the Richard Overstreet interview,<sup>17</sup> he comments, "It is hard to talk about Garbo, really for she says everything when she appears on the screen...a very creative actress who thinks about things a great deal and has a very personal way of acting." (p. 125).

Undoubtedly, Garbo's complex screen persona must have engaged Cukor even before he began working with her, and, as Cukor's films are almost without fail centred on intelligent and creative women who, in the course of the film's narrative, extend or deepen their sensibilities, their professional compatibility and creative output seems to have been foreordained. In the Lambert book, Cukor makes it clear that he didn't approve of improvisation on the set. Judging by the above quotations, Garbo, like Cukor, devoted a great deal of thought to characterization and the text. From another perspective, the two are aligned in that their work together and independently consistently avoids taking either a didactic and/or cynical approach to the subject matter whatever the project. And, finally, in Cukor's work throughout his career, irony is found in a character's perception and not in the director's attitude to the material — again, this links Cukor and Garbo, who has, as I suggested, a highly selective relation to the ironic.

16. Lambert, Gavin, *On Cukor*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972.

17. "Interview with George Cukor," interviewed by Overstreet, Richard, *Film Culture*, Fall, 1964, pp. 1-16.

by Florence Jacobowitz

## Spying on Masculinity:

### *Dishonored*

...One of these, listed  
in the secret files of  
the War Office as X27,  
might have become  
the greatest spy in  
history...if X27 had  
not been a woman.

*Dishonored* was released on April 4, 1931, just four months following the release of Sternberg and Dietrich's first North American collaboration, *Morocco*. In many respects, Sternberg's comments regarding *Morocco* are equally appropriate for *Dishonored*, a spy story set in Vienna during the first World War: "It occurred to me that there was a foreign legion of women, so to speak, who also chose to hide their wounds behind an incognito."<sup>1</sup> *Dishonored*, too, is about a woman who chooses to hide her wounds behind an incognito and does so by transgressing the limitations imposed upon her gender and infiltrating the masculine world of power, excitement and adventure. It is a highly codified world and is one marked by class as well as gender. Both *Dishonored* and *Morocco* make distinctions within the hierarchy of power relations; both Amy Jolly and 'X27' end up reiterating their allegiance to the disenfranchised and the working class to which they belong, and both women learn that society cannot accept

or allow for the expression of their needs and desires. Amy Jolly abandons her last attempt at finding a place for herself in the exiled far corners of Morocco, and follows Tom Brown and the legionnaires

into the barren desert. X27 is punished for being capable of becoming "the greatest spy in history," and for rejecting the system of which spying is a part. What she is spying on, in effect, is the organization of masculine dominance through patriotism and nationhood; she crosses a border which sentences her to death.

When the film is compared to *Morocco*, one notices immediately, a critical difference in terms of the protagonist's relationship with the male lead, and one risks concluding that *Dishonored* is the less successful of the two in terms of the passion and plausibility of the 'love' relationship. Amy Jolly/Dietrich and Tom Brown/Gary Cooper are much more sexually riveting than X27/Dietrich and Lieutenant Kranau/Victor McLaglen, who lack the kind of engagement needed to justify X27's sacrifice. This criticism can be made of a number of films of the period. Greta Garbo's male leads

1. Von Sternberg, Josef, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*, (Secker and Warburg, 1965) p. 245.

Marlene Dietrich in *Dishonored*







The head of the Secret Service and the prostitute

rarely meet or come close to matching her passion, physical presence or commitment. (Consider Robert Montgomery in *Inspiration* as an example; he is the least inspiring male lead imaginable, yet this does not diminish Garbo's extraordinary investment in love.) In fact, the couplings are so notably implausible and unsuited that critics have read Garbo as representing a 'phallic mother' figure to her leading men.<sup>2</sup> Often this is part of the generic criteria of the melodrama. The men in Emma Bovary's life in both Flaubert's and Minnelli's versions (*Madame Bovary*, 1949) cannot live up to Emma's strength and vibrancy. (I am thinking particularly of Jennifer Jones' performance, though Louis Jourdan comes closer to the image of a romantic lover than does Victor McLaglen.) Emma sublimates her lack of satisfaction (sexual and otherwise) into the pursuit of aesthetic beauty. (This desire to compensate for life's disappointments through the creation of a more fulfilling fantasy is also akin to the theoretical premise underlying certain nineteenth century movements in art, like that of the

2. Peter Matthews presents this argument in "Garbo and Phallic Motherhood", *Screen*, Volume 29, No. 3, Summer 1988, pp. 14-39.

aesthetic/decadent movement. One creates a fiction or work of art as a means of bypassing a mediocre claustrophobic reality.) This is, in part, attributable to the fact that 'love' is not the issue at all, and the facade of romantic love is a thin veneer covering the frustrations and emptiness inherent in the female protagonist's social position, masking her desire to participate in a social domain from which women are barred. The freedoms of travel, adventure, the power to follow one's dreams and inclinations are not offered the female protagonist, so she sublimates her potentials and projects them on to the man who can live the life she cannot, and proceeds to "fall in love" with the chosen representative. This is what fuels many romantic obsessions which seem to extend beyond the boundaries of logic and reason. The classic cinematic example might be Lisa Berndle/Joan Fontaine's romantic obsession with Stefan Brandt/Louis Jourdan, in Ophüls' brilliant *Letter From An Unknown Woman*. Lisa imagines Stefan to enjoy all that is denied her: the privileges of the *homme du monde* and an elevated social class.

Often the romantic love-object is an artist, writer, or musi-



cian. The passion and public recognition associated with music and performance far removes Stefan from the dreary world of middle class domesticity. (X27's music serves a similar purpose; it offers her a refuge from the social realities of her life.) Stefan, of course can never fulfil Lisa's expectations because he has never existed as a participant in her life in any actual sense outside of the embodiment of a kind of plenitude women can only imagine. As Lisa writes and narrates, "You who have always lived so freely. Have you any idea what life is like in a little garrison town?" That is precisely what motivates Lisa to the romantic idealisation of Stefan. (Interestingly the setting of turn of the century Vienna and the metaphor of masculinity as embodied through the military is shared by *Letter From An Unknown Woman* and *Dishonored*).

If one judges Lieutenant Kranau by the criteria of a romantic lover, he does, indeed, fall dramatically short of fulfilling the type. One is never convinced that he and X27 like each other to any great extent, let alone experience any kind of romantic or sexual attraction (except along the lines of punishment and pleasure which I will set aside for the moment.) But place him within the tradition of women's fiction where the 'lover' often comes to represent something very different and the film's significance is clarified. It goes hand in hand with the film's opening comments: "If X27 had not been a woman" does *not* mean that her emotional/romantic sensibilities have marred her judgment as a professional (alluding to her 'weakness' in allowing Kranau to escape). It sets the stage for the narrative's meaning that X27 is doomed from the start in a society which oppresses women and particularly those of the working class. The relationship with Kranau, like the whole thematic of the spy, offers a trajectory which may be a reprieve, however temporary, from the choices a woman faces, particularly one who must support herself alone. Unlike her romantic fictional predecessors, Dietrich is much more knowing and aware, and less able to deceive herself into believing that either her participation in the war effort as an Austrian patriot, or her attraction to Kranau will offer her a way out of what she perceives to be an "inglorious" life, as she so understatedly describes her experience. In this sense Dietrich and Sternberg retranscribe the genre's modus operandi. In fact, Kranau becomes much more of a foil to X27 than a romantic lead. The structuring of both characters' interaction is more in line with two male leads competing in the same profession or domain. X27 is attracted to what Kranau relishes: excitement, adventure, danger and the ability to live out and sample a variety of personas, all in the name of one's country.<sup>3</sup> So if McLaglen seems so obviously miscast as a plausible lover, it is because he is not meant to take on these dimensions, and the meaning of X27's 'sacrifice' is not an act of self abnegation leading to her being dishonoured, but an act of protest. As Sternberg complained, she is not "dishonored" but "executed".<sup>4</sup> This is what the film explores.

*Dishonored* begins and ends with a clearly stated subversive thematic: women's social experience, represented through prostitution and poverty, is a form of death-in-life.

3. One can compare X27's attraction to Kranau to Scottie Ferguson/Jimmy Stewart's to Gavin Elster in *Vertigo*. Scottie admires the "power and the freedom" which he lacks and which he imagines Elster to have.

4. Von Sternberg, Josef, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

The alternative trajectory laid out, the offer of redemption through service to the fatherland, is revealed to lead back to the same dead end. Spying is a variation of prostitution, and suicide through gas or the river is replaced by a deliberately chosen execution.

X27 is chosen as a candidate to spy for her country because the head of the Secret Service/Gustav von Seyffertitz judges her life to be worthless, and estimates that she has nothing to lose. She is a street walker and will end up "the way they all do". Although the prostitute/Dietrich denies this near the opening of the film, she asserts that she's "not afraid of life...although I'm not afraid of death either." The head of the S.S. assumes too, that she will be tempted by the offer of making "easy money" because he is disgusted by impoverished working class life. ("Let's go somewhere...away from this unpleasant house...". "It's not always so unpleasant...I live here.") The following day, at the Secret Service headquarters, the head of the S.S. (who remains as nameless as X27) sets up the terms of the bargain very clearly. He will provide the woman with "a magnificent home, servants, all the money you need" in exchange for her skills and services because "there are times when a man's brain cannot accomplish as much as a woman's charm." X27 is recruited to apply her skills as a prostitute in the patriotic service of her country. Although the woman has already demonstrated her loyalty to Austria, by rebuffing the S.S. chief's 'test' of treason (as he himself notes ironically, "Austria may not care what happens to you, but you certainly do care what happens to Austria"), and by countering the S.S. chief's rationalization of the terms of the exchange with her assertion, "What appeals to me is the chance to serve my country," her reasons for risking her life for Austria are never accepted by the men in the film, because they exceed the bounds of her gender and threaten the basis of masculine supremacy. Men exchange their bodies for glory and patriotic commitment, women do it for money. The role of spy is, of all military posts, most appropriate for a woman's involvement. As the S.S. chief explains "It is now my duty to point out to you that the profession of a spy is one of the most ignoble calling cards, lower than anything you have ever experienced...and it is dangerous, of course." X27/Dietrich understands the no-win situation wherein women always lose out and responds with appropriate cynicism: "I've had an inglorious life; it may be my good fortune to have a glorious death." She is aware of the rules but chooses the element of danger and the opportunity of contributing something meaningful to society as men do, despite the lack of recognition. Although X27 may be serving her country and saving lives, the same as any soldier, she's still a whore and the spy is the nation's whore. The double standard (and underlying misogyny) is established immediately and reiterated throughout. There is a strong distinction made in terms of gender. Lieutenant Kranau, who is also a spy, makes this quite clear: "I'm a soldier, but you bring something into war that doesn't belong in it. You trick men into death with your body." This distinction is critical both to the understanding of the notion of honour in warfare, a uniquely masculine domain, and to social perceptions of gender. The double bind ensures women's oppression and legitimizes punishing her transgression: even if she appropriates a role which is socially



beneficial, she is guilty for stepping beyond the bounds allotted her.

One might compare the underlying misogyny to that evidenced in another woman-as-spy film, Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946). Unlike Garbo in *Mata Hari*, who plays a German agent redeemed by love, the protagonists played by Dietrich and Ingrid Bergman are authentically patriotic. Alicia/Bergman has renounced whatever sexual freedoms and 'decadent' behaviour in which she indulged following her father's death. She is recruited as a spy, based on her capabilities as a sexually attractive woman and her affinity with the German society being investigated in South America. Nevertheless, throughout the film, her American S.S. superiors as well as her supposed lover Devlin/Cary Grant never renounce their misogynist judgements, equating her with a whore. They go so far as to risk her life in a slow agonizing death, which can be read as a form of punishment for what she represents.

This metaphor of the woman as 'whore' is a central tenet in the ideology of masculine dominance. Women who do not easily ascribe to their social identity as subservient and domestic pose a challenge which can never be forgiven. There is a distinction made between the whore and the prostitute/courtesan, most simply in the sense that there is a place for the service being exchanged, as long as it remains subservient and within the control of those exploiting the service. The courtesan/prostitute, is removed from the sphere of domestic/reproductive labour, but she denies the awareness of her own sexuality and desirability (which can empower her) and instead presents herself as an enigma: she is there to be whatever the buyer desires, and offers the pretense of the buyer's power, masking the evidence of a commodified exchange. (This is particularly true of the 'upper class' courtesan.) The courtesan/prostitute turns threatening (becoming a whore) when she displays awareness of what underlies the ritual: she knows she is selling an illusion and she is aware of her power to do so. Her knowledge and capabilities, and unapologetic willingness to exploit her assets, make her more terrifying than intriguing.<sup>5</sup> It is akin to the actress/performer. As long as she fortifies the illusion of availability and willing objectification, she can be desired; the moment she signals her own awareness she becomes false and deceptive. This acknowledgement and 'return of the gaze' undercuts her eroticism (which depends on the suspension of disbelief and objectification). This demystification threatens the genderic balance of power. These distinctions are critical to the understanding of X27's narrative and to Dietrich's persona as a whole. She embodies this 'return of the gaze' and her awareness, evidenced in her performance style and in the persona she cultivates, belies any attempt to objectify her or exploit her sexuality for visceral visual pleasure. Her political signifi-

cance is predicated upon negating this kind of appropriation and offering instead representations of women which are intelligent, aware, confrontational, assertive and sensual — in other words, empowered.

This is the thematic articulated in *Dishonored*, demonstrated in the gender games and rituals played out. When X27 affects the role of the 'innocent' — i.e. offers her sexuality unproblematically and without evidence of any awareness or ulterior agenda, she is very desirable. This is enacted, most appropriately in two scenes which both utilize masquerade to sustain the enigma. The mise-en-scène coupled with the narrative premise that X27 is a spy, demonstrates the aspect of performance and the falseness of the ritual. The first instance takes place at the New Year's party, which takes on the semblance of a carnival (very much like the opening scenes in *The Devil Is A Woman*). This scene sets the stage for X27's first assignment: the seduction of Colonel von Hindau (and, later, Lieutenant Kranau). X27's masquerade is eroticized through the exposure of her celebrated legs and through the texture and tactile nature of her costume, which is replete with feathers and sequins; at the same time this is undercut by her cape and headress which gives her the appearance of a 'cock' / cavalier, suggesting sophistication, empowerment and control. She initiates an interplay with the objects of her choice (traditionally within the male domain) by dropping confetti repeatedly on the clown below her (forcing him to unmask at one point), by piercing balloons with darts (Antonio's strategy in *The Devil Is A Woman*) or blowing on phallic party favour horns (paralleling Concha's forthrightness with Antonio in *The Devil Is A Woman*). X27's assertiveness continues in von Hindau's apartment. She orders him to take off her glove and follows this with her pulling him down over her in an embrace; her aggression, however, is appropriately titillating and never threatening, because it never challenges the male's overall sense of authority and power, and because the man involved believes that the woman is offering herself for his pleasure. She plays the vamp — sexually aggressive and subservient at the same time. The scene in the military installation in Tarnow is similar in the way gender rituals are displayed in an overt, conscious manner; the spectator is privileged with the information that X27 is a spy acting a role. Here X27 plays the extreme opposite type to the sophisticated city woman in black: she is the 'ripe' country maid, blushing and without make-up, without any experience ("Did anyone ever tell you how pretty you are?") who speaks very little (outside of the occasional 'meow' and order to 'count ten') and offers herself wholeheartedly to the important military man in uniform.

X27's 'charm' elicits a threatened misogynistic backlash when it becomes apparent that X27 can utilize these social/gender rituals to serve her own ends and can compete capably within the traditionally male domain. This is evidenced a number of times in the responses of both the head of the S.S. (for whom she is, ironically, employed) and the Russian enemy agent, Kranau. When X27 searches von Hindau's home while he is being detained on the phone by the head of the S.S., the latter displays a double edge through his comments, "I hope she had time to look around. She won't find anything...Huh! I had that house searched a dozen

5. T. J. Clarke makes this argument in his chapter, "Olympia's Choice" in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*. (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1985). Clark suggests that Manet challenged the myth of the courtesan by redescribing the nude. Olympia uses the conventions of the nude, but speaks of the prostitute's nakedness. There is no abstraction of sex, of class, of the body or of the female gaze. "It was there in her gaze, her address to the viewer, her consciousness of being looked at for sexual reasons and paid accordingly..." (p. 131). He argues that this was what was so disturbing about Manet's *Olympia*, to the critics in 1865.





X27 and the prisoner, Kranau

times." While X27's mission is to find the coded message, the head of the S.S. simultaneously dreads her success as it evidences her abilities to infiltrate a guarded masculine world and points to that gender's vulnerability. Sternberg underlines this by following the comment with a cut to X27, who finds the secret code in a cigarette and proceeds to smoke the cigarette and play the piano. She appropriates male gestures, which become emblematic of the underlying power being usurped. Not only does X27 achieve success where other agents have failed, but she decides to take charge and "go after the other man", Kranau.

Kranau, immediately is more attuned to the threat X27 poses and this may be because she is a foil to himself. She 'excites' him and he associates her with death — "You know people think of death as an ugly old man. I think of death as a beautiful young woman...wearing flowers." Kranau deceives X27 by leaving her at the casino bar and escaping through a wall panel. The head of the S.S. seems almost relieved that his

sense of order has been confirmed. He informs X27, "You were no match for this man...He's far too clever to be trapped by a woman. Your experience was insufficient...and you had no right to assume responsibility for the arrest of a man who's worth an entire Russian division." That evening Kranau returns to X27's apartment and has his suspicions regarding her being dangerous to him confirmed when he finds the instructions for her next assignment in her coat pocket. He is amused by X27's audacity and willingness to turn him in and confront him with a gun, and treats her in the condescending manner typical of his gender. "And now...are you going to shoot me yourself?" and "better shoot quickly or I'll take that plaything away from you". When her determination to do so registers, and when she is angered by his care to remove the cartridges in her gun, Kranau comments, "This would have been quite a feather in your cap, wouldn't it?". He is still amused by her perkiness and is pleased with himself, and asks X27 if she likes this masquerade (the Austrian officer) as



X27 in masquerade



well as the last one (at the party), but is cut short by the severity of X27's disdainful reproach, "You're still a clown". It is then that Kranau explains the distinction between men like himself who are soldiers and women like X27 who trick men into death with their bodies. Her attempt to regain some foothold through her demand for a kiss, pulling him near her (as she did with von Hindau) is met with Kranau's rebuff "You're a cheat and a liar". Although Kranau is sexually attracted, he never pursues her as a lover; from this point onward the relationship between the two takes on the form of a competition based on their equivalent status as spies. Kranau does not trust her because she can enact disguises as easily as he can, she is as cool and calculating as he is, safeguarded by a strong sense of irony, ("I'm glad you escaped...Your untimely death might have disturbed my conscience.") and because she crosses into an area (his) which is taboo to her gender.

The scene which most perversely displays both Kranau's aroused sexual desire and the need to punish X27 for the threat she elicits, takes place in Tarnow, when Kranau and X27 spend the night together, awaiting the dawn which will bring her execution (based on his orders). Although Kranau rationalizes this as fair play, (as he tells her earlier in her room in Austria, "It's all in the game...had I caught you in my country I'd have shot you without hesitation.") he seems more than comfortable punishing X27 for her ability to deceive and compete in his area of expertise. X27 points out the parallel between them by quoting him, "This is quite a feather in your cap, isn't it?". When Kranau refuses to allow her to escape, "Don't be absurd", she plays her card of seduction, (delivered, ironically, away from him) "I'd like to share my last few hours on earth...with you". Although Kranau is aware of X27's practised ability to perform, "Do you think you can fool me as easily as you did the Adjutant?" his vanity is, nonetheless, touched by her persistence, "I no longer want anything but to be with you", (which succeeds in buying her time to effect a plan of escape). Kranau is titillated by the circumstances of 'one last time', as he notes, "the more you cheat and lie the more exciting you become", and by the idea of making love to someone who essentially represents himself. This meaning is reinforced in the shot. Kranau, facing a mirror, back to the camera, lifts X27, blocking out her image, before throwing her on the bed.

After their lovemaking, Kranau is unconcerned about her impending death, discussing it nonchalantly, reclining on the sofa. He wonders why "a woman like you should choose a road which leads to such a death" and does not comprehend X27's response, that "it's not a bad death to die for my country...It's better than gas or the river." Kranau has taken her for the courtesan/whore who deserves to die for exploiting her desirability and for demonstrating her equality with men; he has no understanding of what motivates X27 or what a woman's choices are in a social world which privileges men like himself. X27 suggests dedicating their final drink "to love" and he adds, "to excitement". Kranau is never capable of giving or seeing X27 as a person who exists independent of his needs and pleasures. The scene ends magnificently with X27 both practically and metaphorically disempowering Kranau with the drugged wine, while Kranau brandishes his

sword uselessly in the air, having lost the duel, crying "You think you can get away, do you?" The comment is loaded, given what X27 is getting away with. She denies herself the punishments deemed appropriate to her transgressions and demonstrates her capabilities as a spy, which are superior to those of her rival. The scene ends with a track in to a medium shot of X27, arms folded, upper body lit against the wood panelling of Kranau's comfortable den.

*Dishonored* significantly differentiates between the celebration of masculinity and the recognition of the kinds of freedom and challenges offered men. The film ridicules consistently the overinflated rituals, the décor and accoutrements signifying masculinity. This theme is introduced, initially, through the chief of the Secret Service. (His pretentious manner, gait, costume, umbrella and general demeanor is later recreated and further exaggerated in the character of Paquito/Edward Everett Horton in *The Devil Is A Woman*). His sense of superiority and obvious condescension are completely undermined by the mise-en-scène of the street-walker/Dietrich's apartment and by Dietrich's ironic wit. He knocks into the strange bobbing bird-like dolls which decorate X27's apartment at the film's opening (similar to the puppet-on-a-string motif in *The Devil Is A Woman*) and fails to impress the future X27 with his talents (signifying *haute culture*) at the piano.

DIETRICH: Shall I drop in another coin?

S.S. CHIEF: Do I sound like a pianola?

DIETRICH: Of course.

S.S. CHIEF: I suppose you're a great musician.

DIETRICH: No...but I do know something about music.

Sternberg represents the fascist-like architecture of the Secret Service headquarters (immense and grand, with long huge corridors visualizing the policy of expansion with which it is concerned) in an overstated, highly stylized manner. Masculinity is pronounced through rooms cluttered with telephones, test-tubes, flasks and laboratory paraphernalia which emblemize the male domain of science, as well as rooms which proclaim masculine power through the motif of conquest and Imperialism, implicit in their wall-to-wall maps of the world. Dietrich, alone in her fur collar and feathered hat, starkly contrasts the costumed officers in their uniforms replete with the hard, shiny surfaces of their buttons and swords. The hierarchical power system inherent in the masculine military world is foregrounded in the few lines spoken between the men in both the Austrian and Russian camps: "Don't smoke in here Lieutenant", and "Take your hat off when you talk to a Russian officer if you know what's good for you." Although the S.S. chief speaks righteously of the vast numbers of men dying, the top-secret projects mentioned include producing a formula which will defy the detection of ink.

The rituals associated with this world of military might and power become increasingly parodied as the film progresses. One of the most idiosyncratic and odd examples of the manifestation of class and masculine protocol takes place in Colonel von Hindau's home. At one point, when he and X27 first arrive and are getting comfortable, the colonel chooses a grape from a cluster in the fruit bowl, eats it, removes the



seed, looks around and, presumably finding nowhere to deposit it, proceeds to flick the seed on the rug. The gesture, in a moment, undercuts the elaborate semblance of class and propriety. Later, when von Hindau realizes that X27 is a spy who has discovered his duplicity and has ordered his house surrounded, he very politely bemoans the charming evening they might have had and adds, "I don't know to whom I would rather surrender". He then throws down his sword gallantly with the words, "My compliments." En route to the library where he has offered to await his arresting officers, von Hindau, again, picks a grape. The camera tracks back and von Hindau follows, opening an armoire where the spectator can see his reflection in a mirror. He again removes the grape seed, looks around and tosses it on the floor. This moment is followed by a cut to X27 and the sound of a gunshot. In the work of a director who more often than not omits large portions of narrative action, the double play of this gesture prior to the moment where von Hindau kills himself 'honourably', wordlessly informs one of a world where humanity is encased and entombed in codes of manners and protocol. (Sternberg is much less sentimental than, say, Renoir in *La Grande Illusion*, where one senses that the director cannot help but admire, and mourn the death of the honorable 'upper' class military gentlemen.)

X27 Dietrich is highly contrasted to this world, both in terms of the way she is visualized and in the way she never participates in stratified systems of behaviour and privilege. She is direct and avoids the pretense of class, exemplified in her remark, "I don't mind walking". From the start, X27 is characterized by her passionate playing and her cat. The music is used to express longing and desire and that which cannot otherwise be articulated. X27's cat is used metaphorically consistently throughout the narrative, as a sign of subversion (rather than the stereotype of 'cattiness') comparable to Baudelaire's use of the cat motif as an expression of sexuality. The cat is also the only ally X27 has. She claims it brings her luck, but more tellingly, as she explains to Kranau, "I'm not allowed to love anything else". The cat motif is foregrounded, overstated and hyperbolic. X27 'meows' when playing the peasant girl hiding from her 'lover'. The cat is often situated on or near the piano. In the scene where Kranau plays the secret code she has transcribed to music, there are a number of repeated close-up shots of X27 clutching her cat in her forearms. This image is later recalled when she summons the notes by memory. Finally, X27 leaves her jail cell en route to her execution holding her cat, dressed again in the fur-collared coat which visually portrays her as an extension of the animal. The cat emblemizes X27's difference and her separation from the masculine domain which never accepts her.

The sequence preceding the trial is pivotal to the trajectory X27 undertakes. It is here that she finally achieves a taste of the power associated with the gender from which she is excluded. X27 has succeeded in passing on the code which in turn gives Austria the upper hand in Poland. (This is visualized in the scene where a group of men surround X27 admiringly as she furiously plays the coded music on the piano, dressed in 'aviator' leather). In the following scene, where Russian prisoners are being questioned, X27, again dressed

entirely in leather, stands smoking a cigarette. Her power, status and newly gained respect is apparent in the way she is granted permission to question the officer who "refused to give his name". As already noted, X27 and Kranau are more like alter egos than lovers. Both refuse to give their name (X27 chooses not to give her name when first asked in the secret service bureau), both are visualized smoking, Kranau, like X27, can play the piano, and Kranau, in this scene, wears a fur hat which visually echoes X27's street uniform. With the power positions reversed, X27 plays the male role in the scene where she interrogates him.

X27: This gun is loaded.

KRANAU: What is it you want?

X27: I have ten minutes in which to make you talk.

KRANAU: You're wasting your time...and mine. (He moves toward the window.)

X27: What would you rather do...than talk?

KRANAU: If you don't mind I'd rather be up in the air...flying...

The scene is barely lit, with bursts of light (ostensibly from the planes outside the paned glass, taking off on the runways) and searchlights interrupting the darkness. Kranau walks around the room and noticing the cat, comments, "Well my old friend...it did bring you luck after all", to which X27 responds, "Perhaps". There is a close-up shot of Dietrich's hand on the pistol at crotch level. She twirls the gun and drops it. Kranau grabs the gun and moves towards the window. "Come here", he orders, and while X27 moves slowly towards him, he tells her, "Now watch me and I'll show you how to play with a gun."

Just at the height of X27's appropriation of the advantages inherent to masculinity, comes the moment where she chooses to give them up. The reasons for allowing Kranau to escape extend well beyond romance (Kranau has made it clear that he'd rather be flying than making love to X27) and is a kind of salute to the energy Kranau represents. It is less his ability to 'play with a gun' (which X27 has proven to have mastered) but his 'adieu' which is significant: "If it weren't going to be more exciting out there, I'd be tempted to stay with you...". X27 is attracted to the vivacity, and the desire for excitement and adventure which propels Kranau. And though she may categorize this as a form of love, the final sequence in which she is judged, sentenced and shot, confirm one's sense that X27's reasons for passing on the gun extend beyond 'love'. She has taken part in the exciting male world which looked far more appealing from afar. In fact, neither gender, as socially constructed, can offer X27 the fulfillment she seeks. She opts, instead, to be reinstated with the disenfranchised as a form of protest to a social system which can never accept her needs as a person and can only exploit her, signified in the impersonal assignation of 'X27'.

*Dishonored* is structured as a journey which ends very much where it began. The male tribunal judging her motives still see her as the poor prostitute they found. Back in the grandiose military palaces (with the maps of the world on every wall representing ever new frontiers waiting to be conquered), characterized by pomp, pompousness and ceremony, X27 expresses her justified suspicion through a refusal to



speak. "I have nothing to say."<sup>6</sup> Her interrogators persist and cannot understand why a woman "charged with important work should permit or aid the escape of a dangerous enemy; Why she should dishonour the service, violate duty, because of a casual affection for that man." The statement reveals the men's predetermined prejudice; they have expected X27's 'failure'. X27 has been charged with important work and has chosen to dishonour the service through the more immediate gratification of her sexual desire. X27, perusing her fingernails (perfectly playing the role she knows they expect) answers, "Perhaps I loved him". This response acts as a catalyst to elicit the barely concealed misogyny underlying the men's judgement all along: the interrogator remarks, "That's the sort of love that can be bought on the street," and the head of the S.S. adds, "I found her on the street". He betrays the sentiments they have held to from the start, and X27 looks at him, understanding this. "You were given a chance to redeem your unfortunate life in the service of this country", she is told, and the close-up of X27's half smile signifies her awareness that she was never given this chance and that her 'unfortunate' life, however dismal, was never as dishonest as the powerful privileged world which she has witnessed. "Can you advance a single reason why you failed to take advantage of that privilege?" and X27 responds, "I suppose I'm not much good...that's all". (X27's reasoning will later be echoed by Helen Faraday in *Blonde Venus*.) She is, in fact, articulating the judgement her tribunal has already passed.

Women like X27 are, and always will be, untrustworthy whores whose talents, however apparent, will be deformed by their inability to subjugate emotional involvement and self-gratification for the greater good of society. The verdict echoes Kranau's "You cheat and lie...you bring something new to war which has no place...you trick men into death with your body. I'm a soldier...". X27 is charged with treason and the penalty is death, "according to regulations". These regulations fix and determine gender politics as well as military politics. As X27's judgement is passed, she looks ahead, face lit, and the shot dissolves into X27 with her hand holding her cat's head. The dissolve confirms the issue of gender at the base of the decision.

The following scene, the priest's visit in her cell, further confirms X27's awareness of what her sentence means and why she has declined to save her life. She tells the priest that she will face death alone. When he remarks, "then you have no fear of death", she pointedly echoes Kranau, "It's just another exciting adventure...the perfect end to an imperfect life." Her words reveal a pathetic truth about the society which has condemned her; exciting adventures are only open to women through death.

*Dishonored* is, perhaps, most noted for an ending which is mistaken for excess camp, when it, in fact, follows logically as a bitter commentary on gender relations which is what the film so carefully analyses. X27 enacts her protest through the performance of feminine ritual, which she waves as a banner, claiming its uniform over the banality and falseness inherent in the codes of male chivalry, honour and class hierarchy. The

gestures become emblematic of defiance, and the seeming indifference, nonchalance and deliberateness with which they are carried out, speak volumes over any cry of protest. They are as overstated as the chords of "Danube Waves" which give form to what X27 refused to state.

X27 chooses against participating in a masculine-dominant society and instead, points to the hypocrisies inherent in its hegemonic laws, and rejects its moral codes. The ending of *Dishonored* echoes Amy Jolly's sentiment expressed in *Morocco*: "There is a foreign legion of women too. But we have no uniforms, no flags...and no medals when we are brave...no wound stripes when we are hurt." X27 requests to die in a uniform of her own choosing and specifies this to be "any dress I wore when I served my countrymen...instead of my country." She has learnt, by the end of her journey that she prefers to die bearing her identity as working class prostitute rather than living with the false dignities and privilege bestowed upon her through her service to the fatherland. X27 has come full circle; she ironically asks the lieutenant who has come to escort her to her firing squad, "Are we going to walk together...again?".

The film's final scene, laden with irony, deflates the potential for melodrama. X27 is never redeemed by love (as Garbo is by the end of *Mata Hari*) or illness (like Ingrid Bergman in *Notorious*) nor is she portrayed as the victim, though the film is critical of her victimization and clearly supports her defiance, expressed through the close-up shot of her softly lit determined face. X27's gestures comment on gender conventions through blatant over-statement. After adjusting her hat and veil in the reflection of an officer's sword, X27 picks up her cat and walks out bravely to face a firing squad. The lieutenant's offer to bandage her eyes is met with disdain and condescension; she wipes the young lieutenant's face with the blindfold and chooses, instead, to return the 'gaze', staring back defiantly. X27 parodies both the young soldier's anti-war protest and the military system he denounces, by taking the opportunity to punctuate his passionate speech with the conventions expected of her gender. Everyone, by this point, is aware of X27's contributions to her country and of her capabilities as a spy. Her gestures mock the 'justice' being affected. The lieutenant's cries of "I will not kill a woman...I will not kill any more men either...You call this war?...I call it butchery..." etc., are interjected with shots of X27, lifting her veil and reapplying her lipstick. The confirmation of the soldier's dramatic moment, "You call this serving your country...I call this murder..." is 'answered' with X27's adjustment of her stocking, a direct allusion to the opening shot. The implications of the ending are unrelentingly bleak; despite X27's strength and intense desire to cheat fate, every road leads back to the same place, be it via gas, the river or a firing squad. *Dishonored* is, in this respect, much darker and less willing to veil its social criticism, than, for instance, *Morocco*. There is no lover to follow, and no place outside of society to seek refuge, though Amy Jolly's walk into the desert is hardly a life-affirming solution, or a viable alternative for women. Both films are permeated with a melancholic pessimism, expressing a keen insight into the complex of gender, class and nationalism, which refuses to accommodate either heroine.

6. This withdrawal into silence is a classic form of female protest. It is elaborated as a thematic in Marlene Gorris' provocative *A Question of Silence*.

# A New Servitude

BETTE DAVIS,  
NOW, VOYAGER  
AND THE RADICALISM OF  
THE WOMAN'S FILM

by Andrew Britton

I wish to discuss *Now, Voyager*, not only because I love it but because it seems to me to raise, in a particularly suggestive form, a number of important critical issues.

There is, in the first place, the question of the political status of 'popular culture'. It is depressingly characteristic not only of the discourse of common sense but also of many supposedly theoretical discourses about the Hollywood cinema that they assume that Hollywood movies are mere inert deposits of 'the dominant ideology' — at the best, of its internal contradictions. I wish to offer *Now, Voyager* as a representative case of a work which is explicitly and systematically *critical* — it is, in effect, an Oedipal fantasy about the expulsion of men from the family — and to provide an account of the conditions in which such a fantasy could be conceived, dramatised and become 'popular'. I will add here, parenthetically, that the reinstatement of a concept of intention ought to be recognised as axiomatic for a properly Marxist aesthetics. Marx's famous comparison of the bee and the architect is a comparison between 'creative labour' which is instinctual, and innocent of all intention, and purposive social activity undertaken by social agents in the context of a complex social present. Art, and indeed discourse itself, are such activities. Every discourse, even the simplest, is a social *action* which involves, by definition, the *use* of given conventional materials — and which may effect their transformation. The intentional *fallacy*, with which intention as such is so frequently and with such facility conflated, consists in the assumption either that an intention is *definitive* of the meaning of a discourse in some absolute sense, or that the validity of an interpretation can be guaranteed by reference *to* an intention, expressed or imputed. I do not wish to use the word 'deconstruction' again; but I will say that "what these gentlemen lack is dialectics", and that it ought to be possible to formulate a theory of discourse, and of art, which is sufficiently agile to grasp the fact that, on the one hand, discourse can only exist in social use as embodied intention and that, on the other, it can only exist within what Raymond Williams has a







William Wyler's *The Little Foxes*



Paul Henreid and Bette Davis in Irving Rapper's *Now, Voyager*



called a framework of "possibilities and constraints" which are in principle prior to any given speaker, and of which s/he need not be aware.<sup>1</sup> Thus works of art embody, or enact, an historical project: they are not tabula rasa, infinitely available for promiscuous free association and 'text-construction'. But at the same time the project does not exhaust the work, which may very well be divided against itself in more or less complicated ways and which may very well generate meanings that exceed, resist or elude its own intention.

Secondly, I want to argue that *Now, Voyager* exemplifies the complexity of the Hollywood tradition. I was once taken to task in print for referring to 19th century American fiction in an article which was supposed to be about *Mandingo* — the objection being (as I recall) that I had allowed my "background in High Culture" to intrude where it had no place. I am sure I am at least as strenuously opposed to the notion of "high culture" as my critic was, but I am equally sure, when I look at *Now, Voyager*, that "high culture" is most certainly not a category to which (let us say) the novels of Henry James and Charlotte Brontë automatically belong, but a category which has been imposed upon them. Dr. Johnson once wrote journalism, Dickens once wrote best-sellers, and Mozart and Verdi once wrote hit tunes; and if the works of these and other persons have now become "high culture", that is not because of some intrinsic property of "highness" which they have in common. "High culture" represents nothing more than the bourgeoisie's misuse of its own, and other people's, artefacts, and if we exclude the products of the various "modernisms" (which the bourgeoisie was never much interested in consuming in any case) we may state it as something of a general rule that today's "high culture" is the "entertainment" of yesterday and the day before, fetishised and surrounded by barbed wire. Classical Hollywood, of course, is in danger of becoming "high culture" itself, after the usual fifty-year time lag, and it is therefore all the more important to bear in mind that classical Hollywood was important because it produced a large number of works in which the contents of "high culture" were released from their ideological quarantine, and in which the great gulf fixed (itself a bourgeois invention) between "high" and "plebeian" culture was effectively abolished. These works, of which I will argue that *Now, Voyager* is one, were immediately enjoyed by a large and extremely diverse popular audience; but they were also in direct and intimate contact with the contemporary avant-garde, and they restored and renewed major traditions from the past which would otherwise have been consigned to the museum and the academy. Charlotte Brontë is as crucial an influence on 40's Hollywood as *Citizen Kane*, and to find a creative use for *Jane Eyre* in the middle of the 20th century is in itself a major achievement. I wish, therefore, to locate *Now, Voyager*, and its genre and star, not only in their immediate historical situation, but in a tradition of works about the position of women which Hollywood inherits from the 19th century novel — a tradition in which Brontë and James are key moments; which has, obviously a feminist tendency; and from which *Now, Voyager* derives its central metaphors — Woman as governess, Woman as foundling, Woman as heiress.

Finally, in that I have described *Now, Voyager* as an

"Oedipal fantasy", I want to address the matter of psychoanalysis and its role in textual criticism, and to argue that the specific ways in which a work articulates the material of the primal fantasies generated by the Oedipus must themselves be located historically — in terms of the particular situation of a work, a genre and a culture.

## THE WOMAN'S FILM AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR

It is a commonplace that the astonishing efflorescence of the woman's film in the early 40's had something to do with the war. The economic facts, as they pertain to Hollywood, are, I suppose, pretty generally known; they are dutifully retailed by all the standard histories — which, however (predictably), mystify their significance by construing them from an economic point of view. What the war did was to impose an extraordinary hiatus in the development of American capitalism: it postponed by about ten years that general social process in terms of which the Hollywood studio system was already becoming archaic and anomalous even as its characteristic institutions were being consolidated. We may describe this process — of which commercial radio, inaugurated in 1922, was the premonitory cultural form — as a movement towards an economy based on individual consumption and social relations characterised by the dispersal and atomisation of persons, who are located in "the home" and constructed as "consumers" by a variety of discourses and practices: a form of "mobile privatisation", in Raymond Williams's phrase.<sup>2</sup>

Culturally, commercial television is the key institution of this phase of American capitalism. Funded as it is by advertising (that is, by the selling of audiences to capital), American commercial television reciprocally defines the spectator as consumer of commodities and "entertainment" as promotion for the promotion, and creates artistic forms which are at every level directly determined as forms by the marketing of the viewer. The principles of fragmentation and flow entailed on television form by the capital structure of the medium preempt intensities and complexities of emotional engagement, and reduce the spectacle to an arbitrary background which perpetually foregrounds, celebrates and seductively fetishises consumption while mystifying its conditions.

The war created a kind of timelock in which the emerging social forms of "mobile privatisation" were abruptly suspended, and in which the public, social pleasures of "movie-going", and the hegemony of an entertainment medium whose capital structure was internal to itself, were granted an unlooked-for and, as it were, accidental reprieve. But more even than this was at stake. After 1941, the domestic American audience was dominated by women — and women, moreover, who were being encouraged to feel that their natural place was not in the home, but outside it. That the proletarianisation of American women had a radicalising effect we know: it has been admirably documented, and even

1. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford 1978)

2. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (Fontana 1974, p. 26)



if it hadn't been it is deducible from the films that they enjoyed. Suddenly "the home", which serves at once to desocialise women and to separate them from each other, no longer existed as such. Davis's audience was defined by the work-place on the one hand and the cinema on the other.

### THE EUROPEAN EMIGRATION

This radical re-structuring of American social relations, and thus of the composition and the orientation of Hollywood's audience, took place in the context of another momentous cultural change — the European emigration. The tendency for the great European directors to gravitate towards Hollywood had, of course, become apparent much earlier: Lubitsch arrived in 1924, Sjöström in 1926 and Murnau in 1927. The motivation in these cases, however — although Lubitsch was Jewish and Murnau both Jewish and gay — was not primarily political: here, the attraction of Hollywood was a matter of technical and economic resources superior to any available in Europe, even in Germany, and the assurance of artistic freedom in deploying them. The mass emigration began in earnest in 1933 after Hitler became Chancellor, and by 1941 the Weimar Republic had moved to California and Hollywood had become the last bastion of European high modernism.

The influence of the emigration on the Hollywood cinema is not susceptible to precise calculation: clearly, there can be no question of many of the most illustrious exile names having made a direct contribution to studio productions as individuals (though some of them did). What we can say — for it is demonstrably true — is that the emigration impinged on a society in a state of absolutely fundamental structural upheaval (economic, political and ideological), and that under these conditions an extraordinary fusion took place between the already existing conventional languages of the American genres and the forms, idioms and preoccupations of the European avant-garde. "Under these conditions" is the crucial phrase: if we try to discuss "the European influence" independently of the historical situation in which it had its effect, we will find ourselves talking, in the usual way, about "Expressionist lighting", "the daemonic city" and "Germanic camera-angles" — which is what most accounts of the "influence" boil down to. It would be more to the point to remind ourselves that from 1941 to 1945 the United States was an ally of the Soviet Union; that throughout the same period the traditional social functions of the home, and traditional discourses about it, were in crisis; and that if the melodrama, the Gothic and the thriller took so readily to psychoanalysis, and proved to be so congenial to directors who had worked with, or absorbed the dramatic theory of, Brecht, that is because these genres were in fact amenable to radical appropriation and development.

German modernism had the impact on Hollywood that it did because it caught the world's leading capitalist power at a peculiarly vulnerable, contradictory and anomalous moment in its history — a moment in which the goal of world hegemony necessitated an *entente cordiale* with an anti-capitalist

state, in which women were pouring into factories and shipyards in droves, in which the economy was booming but there was little to be bought except movies, and in which hundreds of radical intellectuals, perceived as signifiers of prestige and victims of fascist tyranny, could be welcomed to the homeland of democracy and let loose upon a film industry with an autonomous capital structure and a virtual monopoly of artistic production. In these circumstances, and under cover of the usual alibi of "entertainment", the American cinema could quietly incorporate, with every appearance of legitimacy, what the modern movement had to give, and assimilate it to its own sufficiently complex traditions.

The influences which told most decisively for the Hollywood melodrama were those of Brecht and Freud. I have argued elsewhere<sup>3</sup> that the anti-naturalism of the melodramatic tradition, and its tendency to conceive of characters as exemplary embodiments of objective social forces and contradictions, in an implicitly didactic and polemical mode, were very readily available for Brechtian inflection; and in the work of Lang, Preminger, Minnelli, Sirk and the Ophüls of *Caught* and *The Reckless Moment* we see the melodrama turning into a form of American epic theatre which is frequently very much more complex and profound than the plays of Brecht himself. If Brecht's influence has passed virtually without notice (except in the case of Sirk), no one will need to be reminded of the standard line on Hollywood's enthusiastic reception of Freud, which has been an object of facetious jocularity for decades. It is not necessary to deny that we can point to numbers of movies in which psychoanalysis is indeed reduced to a glib, knowing pop psychology, but the fact that *Lady in the Dark* is ridiculous (and Leisen's film, it is worth pointing out, was adapted from an arty, middle-brow Broadway play) is hardly a good reason to traduce the analysis of male heterosexuality in *Gaslight*, or of romantic love in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, or of mother/daughter relations in *Now, Voyager*. The use of Freudian theory in the great 40's melodramas is not especially assertive or explicit, and indeed the phrase "the use of" may be thought to be unfortunate in its implications: There is nothing in *Letter* or *Random Harvest* or *Rebecca* which reminds us of the kind of "applied" psychoanalysis (applied for the delectation of *l'homme sensuel moyen*) which we find in, say, *Blue Velvet* or *The White Hotel* or *Riddles of the Sphinx*. We have the impression, rather, both that Freud has become a part of the common discursive currency, and that he has been included in it in a remarkably creative way: it is not for the credulousness or the superficiality or the schematic nature of their appropriation of Freud that *Notorious*, *The Locket* and *Angel Face* are exemplary. We may argue, on the contrary, that if psychoanalysis enabled a radical deepening and clarification of the material and preoccupations of the genre, these in their turn encouraged an exceptionally partial, and a uniquely political, engagement with psychoanalysis. Freud (and the emigration) did not fall like a bolt from the blue on a culture hitherto disingenuous and naively affirmative. The genres in which their influence was most keenly felt — the melodrama, the woman's film, the Gothic, the urban thriller — had already generated distinguished critical work addressed to the contradictory realities,



material and symbolic, of a specific historical culture. For the present purpose, it will be sufficient to add that the conventions of the woman's film were not a stranger to concepts of "masculine dominance" and "gender oppression"; that the genre's tradition included one of the most radical bodies of work in the cinema (the films of von Sternberg and Dietrich); and that Freud's influence on it was inseparable from the outset from that of the key 19th century feminist novel. If we add to this complex of factors the war-time experience of the woman's film's audience, we are perhaps in a position to suggest that the moment at which Freud "arrived" favoured, or at least allowed for, a progressive interest in him. Certainly, psychoanalysis became something rather different in the hands of the melodrama from what it notoriously became in the hands of the American medical profession — a fact of which the abrasive attitude to therapy in, say, *Kings Row* and *The Locket* is a telling and piquant illustration.

### THE WOMAN'S FILM

There is no such thing as an intrinsically radical genre: the woman's film is no more progressive *per se* than the western is *per se* conservative. A genre is produced in historical circumstances in which a cluster of related values, practices and discourses on the maintenance and reproduction of which a given culture absolutely depends undergoes a crisis of consent, such that the values and practices in question are experienced at once as necessary, unavoidable, even natural, but also as a source of conflict, friction, unhappiness and disharmony. Genres presuppose an ambivalence and uncertainty about a set of dominant values and institutions which is sufficiently profound and sufficiently generalised as to create an audience for narratives in which the crisis of these values is repeatedly acted through, with the most minute variations and inflections, and in which the terms of the status quo whose institutions are at stake are continually re-negotiated and re-secured. If general consent could unproblematically be won for the proposition that women ought to love and be defined by men, there would be no woman's film. The condition of existence of the genre is the fact that this proposition is both emphatically dominant and potentially at risk, and that it is historically possible to respond to it by asserting, either that it is perhaps *not* woman's destiny to love and be defined by men at all, or that even if it is, the consequences and ramifications of this destiny are in substance unacceptable. Of course, if general consent could be won for these counter-arguments, there would be no woman's film either. It is the very impossibility practically of resolving the conflict of interpretations and evaluations and emotional allegiances which the genre articulates that gives rise to the genre — that promotes, in other words, a correspondingly intense investment in the constant re-enactment, re-description and resolution of the conflict as dramatic fantasy. Needless to say, such conflicts can be defined and followed through in ways which are more or less subversive of the priorities of the dominant culture, and in ways which are not subversive of them at all. The materials of a genre are always culturally explosive, virtually

by definition, but the nature of the *treatment* of these materials is determined by other factors. The two most important factors are the artists involved and, above all, the specificities of the historical situation in which genre, artist and audience intersect with each other.

While I will be mainly concerned in this article with the films about motherhood which Bette Davis made in the late 30's and early 40's, and with *Now, Voyager* as the greatest of them, I wish first to consider the contemporary cycle of woman's films about the domestic persecution of married women by their husbands which Thomas Elsaesser has called the "Freudian-feminist melodrama".<sup>4</sup> These two groups of works, though utterly different, have one essential feature in common — their implacable hostility to the social institutions of compulsory heterosexuality<sup>5</sup> and to the organisation of desire which answers to those institutions — and they illuminate each other in extremely important ways. I should make it quite clear at the outset that I am perfectly well aware that there are many war-time woman's films which, far from proposing a hostile critique of bourgeois heterosexuality, undertake massively to reaffirm the role of wife-and-mother as heroic guardian of the "unconquerable fortress" of the American home, or which concern themselves with women's experience of loss, bereavement and emotional frustration or deprivation. It is no part of my purpose to demonstrate that the complex American war-time situation guaranteed the exclusive production of anti-patriarchal woman's movies. I claim merely that it *enabled* them, and on an impressively substantial scale. Works of art are made by persons, and it would be the most ludicrous determinism to suggest that persons who find themselves in a given historical conjuncture must react to it in one particular kind of way. The war, and Hollywood's institutions, allowed for the celebration of the norms as well as their contestation, and I am interested here in the fact that the contestation took place and that it has been almost completely ignored. We may assume, I take it, that the audience which enjoyed *Now, Voyager* and *Rebecca* also enjoyed (say) *The White Cliffs of Dover*, and I am equally far from suggesting that the spectators of war-time woman's movies were bound together by a univocal revolutionary consciousness. Fantasy life, after all, is extraordinarily complex and contradictory, and a great deal is at stake, emotionally and psychologically, in deriving pleasure from a narrative about the abolition of sexual arrangements in which one is at the same time deeply implicated. That this is the pleasure *Now, Voyager* offers I have no doubt, but it hardly follows that such pleasure is incompatible with enjoyment of another narrative in which the same arrangements are affirmed. Indeed, the conservative fantasy may well serve to create an emotional space for the fantasy of resistance and repudiation, and it is implicit in what I have already said about genre that the pleasure of generic art has its roots in the most extreme imaginative ambivalence.

Having said this, it is only proper to add that the Mrs. Miniver's and the *Since You Went Away*'s are far from being as

3. Andrew Britton, *Katharine Hepburn: the Thirties and After* (Tyneside Cinema 1984, pp. 102-3)

4. Thomas Elsaesser, *Tales of Sound and Fury*

5. The phrase is Adrienne Rich's.



simple, as unproblematic or as contemptible as they might seem to be on the evidence of memory, hearsay or the scholarship of Hollywood historians and T.V. guides. It would be hard to advance higher claims for masculine dominance and American domesticity than *Since You Went Away*, which goes so far as to identify its absent patriarch with God, yet his very absence involves the film in difficult contradictions; and when we come to a masterpiece like *Random Harvest*, which passionately commits itself to the projection and realisation of a utopian heterosexual ideal, we find on inspection that the ideal is remarkable for its radical perversity. Like a number of other war-time women's films about "lost loves", *Random Harvest* turns out to be a celebration of the primal crime and the mother/son incest which follows from it. Here, too, although heterosexuality is deliriously reconstituted, the film draws its energy from a fantasy of the negation of the Oedipus.

### THE FREUDIAN-FEMINIST MELODRAMA

The Freudian feminist cycle was initiated by Hitchcock in his first American film, *Rebecca*, which now seems more and more to be the seminal 40's work<sup>6</sup>: from the point of view of the present discussion, it is the work in which psychoanalysis, Charlotte Brontë and the American Gothic are articulated with each other on the ground of the woman's film. The cycle proceeds through Hitchcock's *Suspicion*, Cukor's *Gaslight*, Tourneur's *I Walked With a Zombie*, Minnelli's *Undercurrent*, Preminger's *Whirlpool*, Ophüls' *Caught*, Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door*, and Sirk's *Sleep My Love*; it is also a decisive influence on two more major Hitchcocks, *Notorious* and *Under Capricorn*. At the risk of schematising these works, which are extremely complex and diverse, and a number of which are masterpieces, I would like to outline their recurrent structural features: not all the films have all the features in common, but when we consider the cycle in its totality, the insistence of a dominant thematic pattern is very striking.

**1** A heroine who is defined as socially inexperienced, naive, sexually innocent — above all, as "romantic" in the conventional, colloquial sense.

**2** She meets and falls in love with a charismatic stranger played by an actor who is inscribed in convention as "ideal romantic lover" — a Cary Grant, a Charles Boyer, a Laurence Olivier, a Robert Taylor, a Don Ameche. (This pattern persists in derivatives and pastiches of the Freudian-feminist melodrama which long post-date the end of the cycle proper: consider, for instance, the casting of Rex Harrison in *Midnight Lace*). In some cases, though not in all, the film emphasises the

Oedipal aspect of the heroine's love by indicating that the husband is older than she is and/or her superior in social rank: in *Rebecca*, de Winter/Olivier both replaces and is, as it were, symbolically summoned by the heroine's father who, when she was a little girl, gave her a picture-postcard of the de Winter mansion, Manderley.

The crucial point, however, is that the heroine's motive for falling in love invariably derives from a fantasy of release, fulfilment and liberation which she projects onto the man — liberation from a traumatic past (*Gaslight*), from an oppressive family (*Suspicion*), from the demeaning social role of "old maid" (*Undercurrent*), from economic dependency and exploitation (*Rebecca*, *Caught*), from the sense that she is sexually unattractive, and thus that she is "not the sort of girl men marry", as Joan Fontaine puts it in *Rebecca*. The heroine perceives her husband as the guarantee (dashing, urbane and glamorous as he is) of a completely unanticipated, and virtually fabulous, new life of freedom and sexual pleasure, and she happily commits herself to the "normal" destiny of woman in the belief that marriage is the condition of her own self-realisation. The marriage takes place at the *beginning* of the narrative, the rest of which is concerned with the bloody aftermath of "the happy ending".

A number of these elements persist in *Notorious* and *Under Capricorn*, in which, of course, the heroine is very different from the generic type and in which the Freudian-feminist convention is only one of the materials in play. The Bergman character in both works is sexual and transgressive; she is subject not to one man but to two, both of whom, for different reasons, have an investment in gaining power over her; and the figure in whom she glimpses the chance of a "new life" is not her husband. Nevertheless, the Freudian-feminist theme of the heroine's subjugation through romantic love remains: she is drawn to her lover in the first place because he seems to embody the promise of *redemption*. Devlin/Cary Grant's power over Alicia/Bergman in *Notorious* is the power of guilt about her own and her father's past — guilt which she hopes she can assuage through him but which, in fact, he relentlessly (and neurotically) exacerbates, eventually drawing her into a helpless complicity with her own victimisation. Hatty/Bergman in *Under Capricorn* also believes, at the outset, that she can transform and redeem herself through Adair/Michael Wilding, but here, magnificently, the film moves towards a spiritual recovery in which this investment in the lover is abandoned.

**3** Enter "the house" — archaic, marmorial, labyrinthine, patriarchal. It is here, of course, that *Jane Eyre* and the American Gothic tradition intersect: the prototypes are Brontë's Thornfield Hall on the one hand and Poe's House of Usher on the other. "The house" embodies the masculine secret — the secret of the husband's castration. For it rapidly transpires that the heroine too, unbeknownst to herself, has been constructed as the object of a fantasy which bears no relation whatever to hers, and which requires her to expiate her husband's profound conviction of his impotence by submitting to a corresponding project of domination. In *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*, the husband's fear of "being castrated" is inspired by a first wife who appears in the work as the sym-

6. The influence of *Rebecca* on *Citizen Kane* has not, I think, been noticed — though the derivation of the opening and closing sequences of Welles's film is surely obvious enough. The influence is presumably unconscious, and it is inseparable from a reactionary inversion of Hitchcock's themes. *Kane* is, in effect, the Freudian-feminist melodrama from the husband's point-of-view, and to compare what Welles makes of "the second marriage" (to Susan Alexander) with either *Rebecca* or *Jane Eyre* is very revealing.





Edmund Goulding's *Dark Victory*



bolic embodiment of female sexual energy which has refused patriarchal regulation, and which is experienced by the husband (thought not by the text) as daemonic. In *Gaslight*, the emblem of intimidating female power is the heroine's guardian and surrogate mother, whom the husband has murdered years before, and his obsession with her is an obsession with finding and appropriating her missing jewels, the ownership of which, in principle, has passed to the heroine by matrilineal descent. *Gaslight* defines the jewels as fetishes, and dramatises the husband's compulsion to steal them (which he himself, it's made clear, does not understand) in terms of a need to put the phallus back in its rightful place: *she* doesn't have it, *I* have it. The metaphorical content of the husband's pathology in these films is invariably of this kind. Masculinity, as the Freudian/feminist melodrama perceives it, is driven by an obsessional horror of lack, which has been aroused by a figure from the husband's past (usually, but not always, female) who represents for the husband the troubling or negation of sexual difference, and which can only be exorcised by "the making of a lady" — by the demonstration that the heroine is, incontrovertibly, "feminine" castrated, powerless.

4 From the heroine's point of view, the theme of the Freudian-feminist cycle can be expressed in the formula "compulsory heterosexuality as nightmare". The husband — as is, of course, "normal" — aspires to impose the patriarchal organisation of sexual difference around the phallus as the signifier of that difference, and the films use the metaphor of persecution to identify the husband's project with a process of systematic, socially organised and socially legitimated disempowerment. The effect of the process is the heroine's confinement to the house, where a wife ought naturally to be, and where her predicament is therefore invisible: *Gaslight*, *Caught* and *Notorious* in particular lay great stress on the fact that it is precisely the identification of women with "the private sphere" that allows the persecution of the heroine to proceed. The power relations, and the division of labour, which sustain bourgeois privacy are in any case naturalised, and because a woman's place is in the home it becomes exceedingly difficult to tell whether or not she is there of her own volition or to contest her husband's account of the matter. The point is brilliantly made in the excruciating sequence in *Gaslight* in which Charles Boyer causes Ingrid Bergman to have a nervous breakdown at a concert with the express purpose of demonstrating "in public" that his wife's condition necessitates her incarceration in the "private" home — as opposed to being a consequence of it. The very notion of the domestic privacy of socially unequal partners serves in itself to mystify or rationalise the real conditions of the heroine's privatisation, and it is their perception of this fact which gives the Freudian-feminist films their extraordinary intensity. The possibility of the heroine's persecution is objectively entailed by the social form of the institution of marriage.

5 The heart of bourgeois privacy is the marital bedroom, and its privacy is sanctioned in the name of the act of love. In the Freudian-feminist melodrama, with magnificent symbolic logic, the marriage-bed becomes the site of the heroine's ulti-

mate terror and humiliation, and of the displacement of her sexuality into hysteria. In *Caught* she becomes literally bedridden, and in *Notorious* and *Under Capricorn* the inviolable seclusion of the bed-chamber facilitates an attempt to murder her; but it is *Gaslight*, again, which produces the cycle's most extraordinary metaphor for the power relations of the boudoir. Here, the master-bedroom is directly below the attic, and every evening, while Boyer plunders his wife's property in his desperate search for the purloined phallus, Bergman, prostrate on the bed, cowers in horror beneath him. The symbolic geography of the patriarchal home has rarely been mapped with such exquisite precision.

6 The sexual drives repressed in the marriage-bed for the greater glory of masculine dominance accumulate elsewhere — in the West Wing, at the hounfort, on the 3rd floor, in the cellar, the attic, the boathouse, the stables — in a space of taboo within or adjacent to "the house"; and many of the films move inexorably towards their spectacular and momentous return. In *Jane Eyre*, *Rebecca* and *Secret Beyond the Door* (and, of course, *The Fall of the House of Usher*) the powerful female energies which the male protagonist has sought to disavow erupt, "the house" is destroyed, and the patriarchal line extinguished. In *Undercurrent* the husband is trampled to death by his brother's stallion, whose stables correspond to the boathouse in *Rebecca* (both of them are guarded by a Faulknerian idiot who is privy to, but who cannot articulate, the house's secret). In the great climactic scene of *Gaslight* the heroine recovers her powers, takes control of her mother's house and herself expels her husband from it, instructing the police (in words which seem to sum up the meaning of the Freudian-feminist melodrama in a phrase) to "take this man away".

It is hardly surprising, given the cycle's thematic, that Freudian-feminist melodramas find it exceptionally difficult to negotiate an ending: the interpretation of the final scene of *Suspicion* remains controversial to this day. Narrative closure in Hollywood movies very regularly means "the formation of the heterosexual couple", but it is fairly clear that at the end of these astonishing Gothic visions of the cost of male-dominated heterosexuality for women such closure cannot carry much conviction. The films may well be obliged, in the last five minutes, either to redeem the husband or to wheel on an acceptable alternative — rather as the good king is wheeled on at the end of Jacobean tragedy; but they are committed by the logic of their narratives to undercut their own resolution, sometimes inadvertently, usually with deliberate irony. The "restoration of the couple" in *I Walked With a Zombie* is so perfunctory that it can scarcely be said to take place. In *Rebecca*, Hitchcock suggests that Joan Fontaine's newly-found sexual maturity and self-confidence (she is, in effect, about to become Rebecca) disqualify her as a possible love-object for the husband to whom she appears to have been reconciled and who instructed her, in the days of their courtship, "never to be thirty-six years old". In *Gaslight*, Cukor brutally dispels any confidence we might have been tempted to have in Joseph Cotten by associating him, through the image of the gloves, with the Boyer character's fetishism; and in *Caught*, Ophuls also uses imagery of clothing (in this case, the gift of a coat to



the heroine) to establish a connection between the film's ostensibly antithetical representatives of masculinity.

The objection has sometimes been made that the Freudian-feminist melodrama defines women as, in essence, victims and explains the heroine's persecution in terms of the intrinsically passive and masochistic nature of the feminine character. This objection seems to me to be almost incredibly perverse. The Freudian-feminist heroine is indeed offered as exemplary; but the point of the entire cycle is that she is exemplary for the passion and intensity with which she has internalised the desires, fantasies and ambitions which the culture encourages her to have. If she is her husband's victim it is because she has been schooled to be his good and dutiful wife, and if she becomes the object of his violence it is because she is *supposed* to think of herself as the object of his love. The films are concerned, in the best Gothic manner, with the horror of the normal, and while they clearly invite us to "identify" (it might be better to say "empathise") with the heroine, they are very far from being in the business of selling the female spectator a delicious shudder at the spectacle of her own helplessness. *Rebecca* and *Gaslight* and *Notorious* are so distressing because our involvement with the heroine is so complex. We "identify" with her very closely, but we are also the spectators of a symbolic drama which makes critically present to us the determinants and the conditions of existence of the experience with which we are identifying. The currently dominant "theories" (if they can be called that) of narrative identification induce blindness to the very possibility of such complexities of point-of-view — from which, nevertheless, the Freudian-feminist melodrama derives its political force. The films neither present women as born masochists nor solicit the spectator (construed as female) to immerse herself in the predicament of the damsel in distress who stands in urgent need of rescue by the good man from the turpitude of the bad. They offer an *account* of the feelings they insist that we share, and their representative distinction (representative of the greatness of the great melodramas) is to have achieved a form of spectatorial involvement in which the most intense kind of participation in the *subjectivity* of a particular character co-exists with a heightened awareness of the *objective* social forces in relation to which that subjectivity is organised. The foolish dualism of "involvement" and "detachment" can only mislead: for the spectator of the Freudian-feminist melodrama, the heroine's experience exists at one and the same time as feeling *and* as object.

It is certainly the case, however, that with the crucial exception of *Under Capricorn* the Freudian-feminist melodrama confines itself to the *negative* critique of patriarchy. Without *Jane Eyre* the films could hardly exist, but they nevertheless leave out of the account those central aspects of the novel which can be fairly represented by this:

"It is vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally:

but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seem to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex"<sup>7</sup>.

The central theme of *Jane Eyre* is Jane's struggle to define her own destiny, and Charlotte Brontë's interest in heterosexuality is subordinate to this theme. The Freudian-feminist melodrama has absorbed the influence of Brontë's critique of heterosexuality, but it largely ignores her over-riding preoccupation with the heroine's self-making: at the end of *Rebecca* and *Gaslight*, the *positive* work of feeling towards new norms and new possibilities remains to be done. I will argue in the rest of this paper that this is the work which *Now, Voyager* undertakes — through an appropriation of the work of Charlotte Brontë of quite extraordinary radicalism.

#### NOW, VOYAGER AND JANE EYRE

My title, "a new servitude", is taken from one of the most famous and beautiful passages in *Jane Eyre*. Jane has been teaching at Lowood for eight years. "I had given allegiance to duty and order", she says; "I was quiet, I believed I was content". The departure from the school of Miss Temple, Jane's colleague and only friend (who marries a man described, with wonderful Brontë-esque asstringency, as "an excellent man, almost worthy of such a wife"), convinces Jane that she no longer has a reason, as she puts it, to "be tranquil":

"...now I remembered that the real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils".

She goes to the window, opens it and looks out — as women in 19th century novels and Hollywood melodramas so often find themselves doing:

"I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing. I abandoned it and framed a humbler supplication. For change, stimulus. That petition, too, seemed swept off into vague space. 'Then', I cried, half desperate, 'grant me at least a new servitude!'"

Jane considers the phrase, and concludes that there must be "something in it" because

"...it does not sound too sweet. It is not like such words as

7. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Penguin 1987, p. 141).





*Now, Voyager*

Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment: delightful sounds, truly, but no more than sounds for me, and so hollow and fleeting that it is mere waste of time to listen to them. But Servitude! That must be a matter of fact. Any one may serve. I have served here eight years; now all I want is to serve elsewhere. Can I not get so much of my own will! Is not the thing feasible! Yes — yes — the end is not so difficult, if I had only a brain active to ferret out the means of attaining it".<sup>8</sup>

Jane, in other words, cannot overthrow patriarchy single-handed: given, then, the fact of masculine dominance, what are the possibilities? To what extent, under these onerous and intractable conditions, can the heroine ask the question "what do I want?" profitably? — in such a way, that is, as to act on it. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Now, Voyager* are about women for whom the question of political action does not arise, for obvious historical reasons, and who are correspondingly preoccupied with the task of negotiating between the promptings of their own will and an actually existing social world which is in every way inimical to them. Both works, too, have an obviously similar narrative movement. At the outset, the heroine

8. *ibid.*, pp. 116-18.

is located in a position of humiliating and embattled dependency in a home ruled, in the Name of the Father, by an intensely neurotic widowed woman whose oppression of the heroine is traced by the work to her own self-oppression. The main body of the narrative is concerned with the heroine's attempt to discover what her will is, and what she wants, in relation to the things that a succession of representative men want for her: and we end in both cases with the setting up of another "home" governed by conventions and constraints which we are invited to read, not as having been simply imposed on the heroine by patriarchy, but as having been determined by her through a strategic compromise with it. This is what "the new servitude" means: it is "neither free absolutely nor constrained absolutely"; and while we are certainly to feel that the heroine remains subject to the demands of a culture whose interests are essentially opposed to hers, we are also to feel that she has got, in Jane's phrase, "so much of her own will" as possible under the given conditions. The subject, then, can be expressed in the form of a question: how can the heroine make a history for herself in circumstances which conduce to her not having one at all?

The implications of posing this question as the subject of an *American* film are foregrounded by the film itself through



another reference, this time explicit, to literature — to the lines of Whitman from which the film takes its title: "Untold want by life and land ne'er granted/Now, Voyager, sail thou forth to seek and find". It is Dr. Jacquith who introduces the quotation, and who goes on to say that "if Old Walt didn't have you in mind when he wrote those lines, he had somebody very like you". The film's point, of course (and it is one of its many points against the doctor) is that "old Walt" most certainly did *not* have Charlotte or anyone like *her* in mind, for the simple reason that in American culture the persons who sail forth to seek and find, who take to the open road, who "light out for the territory" — are *men*. If the film so elaborately invokes the poet of the "dear love of comrades", it is precisely to stress the anomalousness of doing so in a narrative about a woman. The opposition between heterosexual settlement and homosexual mobility so fundamental to American culture is premised on the assumption that women do, and want to, stay at home, and that they do and want to impose on men the domestic shackles which are so congenial to themselves — thus driving men out into the wilderness to bond with each other. An American Jane Eyre is a paradox, and it is the function of the film's title to present this paradox as an essential component of the theme.

#### THE ERASURE OF THE PHALLUS

In order to understand *Now, Voyager* (and indeed, the woman's film as a genre) we need to understand its conventions, and the most radical and, to 80's audiences, the least familiar of these conventions is that which governs the representation of the "romantic lover".

It will be immediately apparent that the casting of woman's films tends to be jarringly asymmetrical: the heroine is radiant, passionate, vivid, brilliant, and played by an actress of genius (a Davis, a Garbo, a Hepburn, a Bergman, a Stanwyck); the hero can scarcely be said to exist. This structural inequality is especially striking, perhaps, in such cases as the two Garbo versions of *Anna Karenina*, where the films derive from a novel in which the lover is as complex and profoundly realised a character as the heroine herself. Anna remains, as Garbo embodies her, Tolstoyan, but Vronsky has been reduced to stage machinery. The automatic explanation, to the effect that the lover is "badly played", is tempting but inadequate: while it is certainly true that the acting of John Gilbert and Fredric March is, in the worst sense of the word, "conventional", their feebleness is evidently a function of the films' total lack of interest in them, and this lack of interest indicates in its turn that the films find it impossible from the outset to offer Vronsky as a viable alternative to Karenin. Even when "the lover" is played by an actor who is in principle a powerful and distinctive presence, the actor's charisma is negated by the narrative type he is playing: Mitchum's role in *Undercurrent*, or Gable's in *Susan Lenox*, are exemplary in this respect. The same rule by no means applies to the "bad husband" (or his equivalent): Basil Rathbone's glacial Karenin is substantial enough, and Boyer's staggering performance in *Gaslight* only emphasises the significance of the casting of

Joseph Cotten as his replacement. The heroine's passion, and the unacceptable heterosexual male who is responsible for her suffering, are felt to be dramatically real, but the man whom she loves, or whom the text seems to thrust upon her as the solution to all her problems, is not.

It is all too easy for the sophisticated modern spectator (who has got as far, after all, as Steven Spielberg) to fail to recognise this convention as a convention, and to smile knowingly at what s/he takes to be the susceptibility and simple-mindedness of a primitive female audience which (it is happily assumed) went weak at the knees every time Paul Henreid appeared on the screen. The films themselves provide no evidence whatever for this assumption, which is based entirely on a pejorative psychology of women reinforced by the habitual tendency, where Hollywood movies are concerned, to read narrative events independently of their realisation. Because woman's films are about "romance", it follows as the night the day that they are, and were in that distant and more innocent age enjoyed for being, "romantic" — and they are therefore "camp" now for the inhabitants of a culture which loses no opportunity to flatter us all on our ability to see through everything. But alas, Paul Henreid is a strategy — and the works in which he and his ilk are vaguely on hand were made for an audience very much more cultivated, and incomparably more political, than any imaginable popular audience today.

The best way to define the lover convention is through an analogy with a proposition of Lacan's in his seminar on female sexuality, *Encore*.<sup>9</sup> Lacan suggests that the status of the concept of Woman in a phallogocentric Symbolic order can be expressed as the formula Woman, under erasure: patriarchal language includes Woman, but only as that which is at the same time excluded "by the nature of words". The formula for "the lover" in woman's films is Phallus. In himself, the lover is not of the slightest importance: he is merely a logical abstraction entailed in the undertaking to dramatise the heroine's experience of heterosexuality. It is this experience which matters, and the lover is a conventional function of its representation: that is to say, he is the catalyst required in order to motivate the complex social/emotional predicament in which the heroine finds herself as a result of "being in love". The Symbolic of the woman's film includes the lover as signifier of the phallus — but it includes him only as a precondition for the enactment of the woman's desires, sufferings and struggles, which the genre defines as dramatic objects independent, and *visibly in excess*, of the phallus as the lover signifies it. This excess of the heroine's intensity over the object which seems to generate it is articulated by the star system, and registered as an excess of the dramatic reality of the star actress over that of the leading man. Indeed, the woman's film produces an entire repertory of actors, as innumerable as the progeny of Banquo, whose sole purpose in life is to embody (if that's the word) the erasure of the phallic signifier. The most exquisitely null, the most thoroughly and systemati-

9. Jacques Lacan, "God and the Jouissance of Woman": in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (Macmillan 1982, pp. 137-49). I should probably add that I do not accept Lacan's account of female sexuality, and that my use of the concept of Woman is entirely opportunistic.



cally erased, of these standard items of male furniture is no doubt George Brent, but it seems peculiarly fitting that another of them, Herbert Marshall, actually had a wooden leg.

This extraordinary convention has a striking precedent in the symbolic language of a 19th century form which is literally "melodramatic", the woman-centred tragic opera. Bellini's and Donizetti's treatment of their tenors in *Anna Bolena*, *Norma*, *Il Pirata*, *I Puritani*, *Maria Stuarda* and their other *opera seria* corresponds exactly to the treatment of the lover in the woman's film, and it is legitimate to assume that the main reason that these magnificent works are so seldom performed (the fiendish difficulty of the soprano roles apart) is that few competent tenors can be found who are prepared regularly to take on the thankless task of singing in them. Even when the composer is kind, or canny, enough to placate his tenor with one or two good arias, the important role in the "prima donna" opera (where there is one) is always the baritone, just as the important male role in the woman's film is always the father, the husband or the doctor; and *Norma* and Donizetti's historical operas subordinate the male characters to a central relationship between women in the same way, and for the same reasons, as the films of Davis and 30's Hepburn. Even more remarkably, there is an intimate connection between the metaphor of persecution in the Freudian-feminist melodrama and the classical operatic theme of the heroine's decline into madness and delusion — a connection of which Cukor, at any rate, is aware: the Bergman/Boyer relationship in *Gaslight* begins under the distinctively unfavourable auspices of a quotation from *Lucia di Lammermoor*. As we might expect, the echoes of the convention of the "mad scene" are especially pronounced in Griffith's melodramas with Lillian Gish, which are in themselves one of Hollywood's main links to the 19th century. Gish's hysteria in the closet in *Broken Blossoms* and the baptism of the dying child in *Way Down East* are, in effect, "mad scenes", and in the famous sequence with the bouquet of flowers in *A Woman of Affairs* the convention passes from Gish to Garbo.

The woman's film, in fact, has drawn the conclusions of Italian woman-centred tragic opera from the dramatic material the two forms have in common. The basis of the convention of the erased phallus, in both cases, is the fact that while the man is theoretically necessary in order for heterosexuality to take place, he is also curiously marginal, and even irrelevant, to the general cultural issues which it raises. There is no question of love being *his* destiny — and no question, therefore, of the existing structure of the social order being at stake in his unhappiness with, yearning for, ambivalence about or rejection of heterosexual relations. Thus when he has said — "I love you, love me in return" — his dramatic interest is exhausted; but the fate of patriarchy itself hangs on the woman's response. If she says "yes", all is well: the affirmative reply secures her in her subordinate social position, and is as intrinsically undramatic as the "I love you" it answers. But if she then withdraws her consent, or if she says "perhaps", "yes, but", "on condition that", "couldn't we wait?", "mai più" (the operatic variant) or plainly "no", then the seamless fabric of masculine dominance begins to unravel and a thousand narratives instantly materialise. The woman's film dramatises heterosexuality, from the woman's point-of-

view, as a site of struggle and conflict, oppression and potential resistance, in which the heroine is subjected to radically contradictory pressures, imperatives, drives, obligations and sympathies. In the presence of this critical turmoil, on the outcome of which the heroine's well-being and the dominant social arrangements diversely and incompatibly depend, the lover himself is effaced. He is merely required to unleash it.

A great many woman's films of the 30's and late 20's create the distinct impression that although they habitually make use of the convention of the erased phallus, they do not quite understand its consequences and implications — or that they understand them only in an essentially pragmatic manner.<sup>10</sup> Thus if Garbo is in love with Conrad Nagel, Ramon Novarro and even Gavin Gordon, that is because it is Garbo whom people go to see, and they would continue to go to see her if she were in love with Joe Schmo — as, to all intents and purposes, she usually is. The effect of this pragmatism, however, is to expose compulsory heterosexuality to attack on its weakest flank: the reality of the sexual promise of the male is irretrievably undermined. That *Queen Christina* (for example) wishes us to believe in that promise there can be no doubt. The film's insistent theme is the tragic conflict, for a woman, between heterosexual love (identified with fulfilment) and power (identified with self-abnegation), and we are invited to feel that Christina/Garbo has discovered, through her love for Antonio/John Gilbert, the authentic sexual identity which her duties as a monarch have always required her to suppress. And yet in that legendary bedroom sequence — legendary, precisely, as a *locus classicus* of Garbo's art — Antonio becomes a mere bemused spectator ("What are you doing?") of the *jouissance* which he is alleged to have caused, and which Christina herself goes on to compare to the experience which God must have had when He created the world and beheld "all His creatures breathing, living". The male is as completely superfluous to the privileged moment of heterosexual awakening as he will be to the privileged moment of heterosexual loss enshrined in the final shot, where Antonio's death at last provides the film with a cast-iron alibi for the ecstatic annihilation of its own manifest content. Finally, at the very moment of closure, and protected by the mask of tragedy, *Queen Christina* can confess with impunity the secret of which it both is and is not in possession — the secret of Garbo's (the woman's) power and self-sufficiency. The paradox of *Queen Christina* is that although it could not exist in the form that it does without the convention of heterosexual romantic tragedy it shows no real interest in this convention, and at all points uses it opportunistically so as to realise meanings and feelings which are in contradiction with it.

The woman's film stumbles upon this secret unawares: its discovery is the inevitable but (we may assume) accidental result of the mediation of the genre's thematic by the star system. The secret was shared (that is, known and not known) by Garbo's audience.

"Female, 17, white, high-school senior: 'I imagined myself caressing the heroes with great passion and kissing them so they would stay osculated forever ... I practised love scenes either with myself or with a girl-friend. We sometimes think we could beat Greta Garbo, but I doubt it'"<sup>11</sup>.



These extraordinary remarks are quoted by one Herbert Blumer in his book *Movies and Conduct* (published in 1933 in apology for the Hays Code) as evidence of the appalling effects of Garbo movies on the morals of America's youth, and I think we are entitled to claim that they are representative. In saying this I do not mean to imply, of course, that all Garbo's female fans, if asked, would have expressed themselves in the same way: Mr. Blumer's candid interviewee strikes us as representative because the fantasy she describes (and, it would seem, wholeheartedly acts out) corresponds so exactly to the treatment of heterosexuality in *Queen Christina* itself. The fantasy has three components — a lesbian identification with Garbo; a lesbian identification with "the hero" in his capacity as Garbo's love object; and an active heterosexual identification with Garbo which reverses the power relations of compulsory heterosexuality and assigns to the erased phallus the task of confirming the speaker's sense of her own sexual potency. The conventional "feminine" heterosexual identification is the only one of the various possibilities which has been excluded, and its exclusion is obviously the point of the fantasy. It would be a very serious error to assume that the speaker has merely allowed her erotic imagination to run riot and that in doing so she has left Garbo's work far behind her. On the contrary, the significance of the fantasy is precisely that the movies which inspired it allow for, and even encourage, the kind of imaginative investment which the fantasy represents, for the conventions which the woman's film employs to dramatise compulsory heterosexuality have the curious effect of undermining its rationale. It ceases to be possible to think of the man as naturally causing, justifying and potentially gratifying the woman's desire, and the extraordinary excess of the heroine's reality and energy over her lover's makes her available both for identifications and for forms of object-choice which are subversive and perverse.

Since the appearance of Laura Mulvey's famous and much-reprinted essay on *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* it seems to have become one of film theory's articles of faith that Hollywood movies construct a masculine identification.<sup>12</sup> The blatant inaccuracy, the tendentiousness and the cavalier indifference of the "readings" of Sternberg, Hawks and Hitchcock with which Mulvey substantiates her thesis do not seem to have diminished its popularity in the slightest, so nothing that is said about it here will be found at all convincing by those whose desire to be told what Mulvey tells them considerably exceeds their interest in the works she purports to discuss. I will risk the suggestion, nevertheless, that a great many woman's films give us grounds for inquiring whether they allow for a masculine identification at all. What, confronted by *Queen Christina*, *Stagedoor* or *Now, Voyager*, can the masculine (that is, male-identified) heterosexual male spectator possibly do? He can, I suppose, in principle, identify himself with the erased phallus and desire the heroine; but quite apart from the fact that the films neither incite nor reward such an imaginative exercise (it must be both a staggeringly difficult and an exceptionally thankless task to identify with George Brent) the male spectator who, in defiance of the obstacles, undertakes it will inevitably find himself identifying with a person

and a position which the film he is watching has more or less abrasively placed. In that the erasure of the phallus is something which the woman's film *does* but to which it seldom *refers*, it is just conceivable that a male-identified man might find some means of inserting himself into the symbolic field of the work: not all woman's films actually *announce* that they are erasing the phallus as Sternberg's and many of Davis's do, and works which are more reticent on this point may perhaps allow a certain leeway for masculine appropriation. The price to be paid is the mis-reading of the film — and (it may be imagined) a nagging sense of being left out even as one insists on being included. The masculine spectator who approaches *Queen Christina* from John Gilbert's direction *must* fail to see what is going on, and he can hardly be spared the suspicion (at whatever level of consciousness) that he has himself been placed under the sign of erasure. His only alternative is to be bored; and I gather from such conversations as I have had with women who saw the films at the time of their release that men either did not go to woman's films at all or went to them under duress. It is very easy to see why.

For the female spectator, however, the woman's film invites to a positive festival of perverse affects. As we learned from Herbert Blumer's shameless interviewee, the erasure of the phallic signifier which creates such difficulties of access for the masculine spectator works wonderfully for the women in the audience, in that the lover's very vacancy opens up a quite extraordinarily diverse and complex range of imaginative options in relation to the female star. The woman's film derives its emotional power from the realisation of these options, which survive — which exist, indeed, independently of — the operation of the narrative laws which sometimes seem to foreclose them. The fact that Garbo or Davis or Stanwyck are killed or married off at the end does not matter. The restoration of the patriarchal order, when it takes place, is purely conventional, and is usually presented as being so.

The Second World War crystallised the significance of the woman's film in rather the same way that, thirty years later, the war in Indochina and its domestic ramifications crystallised the significance of the horror movie. Suddenly, under the conjoint impact of German modernism, psychoanalysis, Hitchcock's recovery of *Jane Eyre* and the revolutionary transformation of the social position of American women, the generic secret which *Queen Christina* does and does not know becomes available for systematic articulation. The Freudian-feminist melodrama and Davis's films about motherhood explore this secret and its implications in very different ways, but one's sense of the interrelatedness of the

10. The exception, of course, is von Sternberg, who understands it perfectly, as the performances of Victor McLaglen in *Dishonoured*, Clive Brook in *Shanghai Express* and Cary Grant in *Blonde Venus* very sufficiently attest.

11. Quoted in Raymond Durgnat, *Greta Garbo* (Studio Vista 1965, p. 59).

12. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (*Screen* Vol. 16 No. 3, 1975).

13. The lover may cease to be merely Phallus and become a dramatically significant figure on the one condition that he is represented as being capable of recognising that his own investment in masculinity entails the suffering of the heroine. The classical case is *Letter from an Unknown Woman*.



two bodies of work is strikingly confirmed by the casting of George Brent in *The Spiral Staircase*, where the exemplary fetishistic psychopath of the one group of films coincides with the exemplary erased phallus of the other.<sup>13</sup>

### THE MOTHER AS GOVERNESS

The treatment of the lover in *Now, Voyager* (and the group of Davis movies with which it belongs) is inseparable from the film's preoccupation with motherhood. Here, as in *The Old Maid* and *The Great Lie*, the important relationships are not relationships of heterosexual love but relationships between women and children — in particular, of course, between mothers and daughters — and men appear in the films only as functions of these relationships. This concern with motherhood is, again, strategic. It represents an attempt to negotiate a fundamental narrative problem which works that analyse the vicissitudes of heterosexuality from a woman's point-of-view have repeatedly encountered, and which is classically exemplified in *Jane Eyre* itself. Charlotte Brontë wishes to criticise male-dominated heterosexual love as an institution, and she does so with incomparable power and intensity; but she has no alternative at the end of her great novel but to imagine the heroine's "new servitude" in terms of the institution she has rejected. The final chapter of *Jane Eyre* begins, famously, with the portentous and inexorable sentence — "Reader, I married him": and while it may certainly be argued that this sentence presents, rather than simply reproduces, the laws of closure, the fact remains that these laws weigh heavily on the last quarter of the novel, after Jane's discovery of the mad wife and her departure from Thornfield. Charlotte Brontë is imaginatively obliged at this point to introduce a second heterosexual man, the pastor and aspiring missionary St. John Rivers; and although the sequences dealing with Jane's struggle for spiritual survival against Rivers' egotism and possessiveness are magnificently done in themselves, Rivers' primary function at the level of structure is to offer Jane access to the public world in which things are done and history is made on terms which are plainly unacceptable, and thus to rationalise the narrative's obligation to affirm a reformed heterosexual domesticity at the close. Jane is perfectly willing to go with Rivers to India, but she refuses the offer of marriage on the acceptance of which he insists as an absolute condition of her accompanying him; and while his intransigence on this point is eminently credible psychologically (his domination of Jane will only be complete when he is in a position to deny her sexual gratification) it has the practical effect of foreclosing the range of options which is open to the heroine. Jane is no longer faced with the task of defining herself autonomously in the social world, in relation to constraints of her own choosing, but with an exclusive alternative which consists of two men, both of whom propose marriage but only one of whom can be thought of as "needing" her.

Jane's return to Rochester is necessary because Charlotte Brontë can only imagine the total rejection of masculine dominance as the madwoman — that is, as self-immolation: and indeed, the madwoman is the kind of embodiment of female

rage and rebellion which appears in a work where the necessity of reinstating bourgeois marriage in some form or other is unavoidable. Jane and Bertha Mason are linked throughout the novel by fire imagery, but it is not Jane who burns down the patriarchal house and blinds Rochester — and the madwoman's paradoxical role, as a surrogate embodiment of Jane's own fury, is to collaborate with Rivers in the engineering of the narrative conditions for Rochester's redemption and Jane's incorporation in the status quo as wife-and-mother. The madwoman creates that "need" of Rochester's for Jane which allows the novel to suggest that the "new servitude" can be realised in the form of Jane's marriage to him, and Charlotte Brontë proceeds dutifully to tell us that the bad patriarchal home (Thornfield) has been replaced by a good one (Ferndean) and that Jane is happy. But she does not believe a word of it, and she leaves us, in her final paragraph, not with the happy family and the happy couple but with St. John Rivers, who has laboured mightily for his race and who, when he dies, "will stand without fault before the throne of God". Charlotte Brontë knows well enough that this is the only place to be, but in order to stand there herself she is obliged to shift her own, and her reader's, identification, not only from the heroine to a man, but to a man who embodies values to which her novel is implacably opposed. Rivers derives his power over Charlotte Brontë's imagination from one fact, and from one fact only: we are told — in a phrase which clearly corresponds to "Reader, I married him" — that "St. John is unmarried: he never will marry now". Because he is a man, Rivers can make his "new servitude" for himself, and in the context of Jane's domestication at Ferndean, his vices suddenly appear as heroic virtues: "his is the sternness of the warrior Greatheart, who guards his pilgrim convoy from the onslaught of Apollyon".

If the Freudian-feminist melodrama derives its inspiration from Jane's relationship with Rochester, the Davis motherhood cycle ignores Rochester completely and concentrates instead on the latent possibilities of the relationship to children entailed by Jane's profession. Charlotte Brontë indicates the nature of these possibilities herself in that extraordinary passage of the novel's final chapter in which the memory of Adèle, Rochester's ward and Jane's pupil, emerges from the textual unconscious to haunt the corridors of the happy heterosexual home.

"You have not quite forgotten little Adèle, have you reader? I had not; I soon asked and obtained leave of Mr. Rochester, to go and see her at the school where he had placed her. Her frantic joy at beholding me again moved me much. She looked pale and thin: she said she was not happy. I found the rules of the establishment were too strict, its course of study too severe, for a child of her age: I took her home with me. I meant to become her governess once more, but I soon found this impracticable; my time and cares were now required by another — my husband needed them all. So I sought out a school conducted on a more indulgent system, and near enough to permit of my visiting her often, and bringing her home sometimes".<sup>14</sup>

14. Brontë, op. cit. p. 475.





Gladys Cooper and Bette Davis in *Now, Voyager*



Miriam Hopkins and Bette Davis in Vincent Sherman's *Old Acquaintance*



Here, it might be said, we have the germ of *Now, Voyager*: even as the walls of patriarchy close in upon her, Charlotte Brontë envisages another ending from which Rochester has been excluded and in which Jane's "times and cares" can be devoted to another object.

The role of the governess is, understandably, one of the 19th century's dominant metaphors for the position of women. The point of the metaphor is the indeterminacy of the governess's place in the structure of patriarchal domesticity: she is neither properly a servant nor properly a part of the family. Although the governess can in some sense be thought of as occupying the role of a parent, there is no question of her being anything other than a menial and an inferior: in her biography of Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell records an incident in which the mother of one of Brontë's pupils, having overheard her child tell Brontë that he loved her, promptly exclaimed — in Charlotte Brontë's presence, and in front of all the children — "Love the governess, my dear!" At the same time, her intimate contact with the children of her employers places the governess in a position curiously different from that of the other servants — with whom she unquestionably belongs but from whom she is also separated by her functions in relation to bourgeois private life. Her status in the home is fundamentally contradictory, and in one of the key governess narratives, *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James defines these objective contradictions as the material basis of the narrator's hysteria. The governess becomes exemplary of the destiny of women because she is included in the family as that necessary non-person whose task it is to reproduce, through her education of children who are and are not hers, the norms and values of the social order which oppresses her. "I see more clearly than I have ever done before", wrote Charlotte Brontë,

"that a private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living rational being, except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfil".<sup>15</sup>

The equivalent metaphor for girlhood is the metaphor of the foundling — initiated, like so much else, by Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park*. Like the governess, the foundling is *in* but very definitely not *of* the patriarchal family. She associates and she is educated with the other children but she is also inferior to the servants, and she is continually reminded of her difference and her dependency, and of her obligation continually to express her gratitude for the privilege of being permitted to remain in the home at all. As the young Jane Eyre is dragged off for punishment in the red-room she is told by Abbot the maid:

"And you ought not to think of yourself on an equality with the Misses Reed and Master Reed, because missis kindly allows you to be brought up with them. They will have a great deal of money and you will have none: it is your place to be humble, and to try to make yourself agreeable to them".<sup>16</sup>

We are now in a position to define more precisely the nature of *Now, Voyager's* appropriation of *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte begins life as a foundling: the Masters Vale have a great deal of

money and she has none, and it is her place "to repay a mother's love and kindness" by being a dutiful and obliging daughter. She then becomes the madwoman in the attic, but instead of channelling her energy into burning the house down she invests it in the project of transforming the social functions of the governess. The governess brings up another person's child within the patriarchal family, and in doing so she is condemned to perpetuate the social conditions of her own subordination. Charlotte takes another person's child out of the patriarchal family, and in doing so she creates the social conditions in which both her own subordination and that of another foundling are eliminated. The formula for *Now, Voyager* is "the governess conquers the house", and in the final scene "the new servitude" which, because of Rochester, is "impracticable" for *Jane Eyre* is successfully negotiated.

The Davis motherhood cycle begins with two films which use the governess metaphor quite explicitly. Davis plays a governess in *All This and Heaven Too*, and the position in which the "Aunt Charlotte" of *The Old Maid* is eventually included in bourgeois domesticity, while not literally that of a governess, is plainly analogous to it. *The Old Maid*, of course, is a tragedy: the first Charlotte's attempt to remove her child from the family is thwarted near the beginning of the film, and she is subsequently trapped in the social role which the heroine of *Now, Voyager* is able to transform. The difference between the two Charlottes is primarily a difference of consciousness: I have argued elsewhere<sup>17</sup> that the protagonist of *The Old Maid* is defeated because she never questions *in principle* the social/sexual values which are the cause of her own suffering, and it is useful to think of *Now, Voyager* as a remake of, or sequel to, the earlier work in which the heroine's ability critically to disengage herself from patriarchal femininity allows her to resist and overcome the social forces which destroy her predecessor. *The Great Lie* represents a point of transition between the two works. There is no space here for the detailed analysis which this extraordinary (and rather difficult) film deserves. It will be sufficient to say that *The Great Lie* takes the crucial step — crucial, that is, for the radical reinvention of the governess metaphor — of suggesting that the total elimination of the phallic signifier from the child-rearing process is not only possible but also desirable.<sup>18</sup>

The shift of emphasis, in the Davis motherhood cycle, from *Jane Eyre's* relationship with Rochester to her relationship with Adèle is accompanied, quite logically, by the most drastic and systematic campaign of phallus-erasure in the history of the woman's film: with brutal and unrepentant frankness, the lover is reduced to a device for the production of children. Indeed, to father a child in these films is more or less to accept a passport to narrative oblivion. As soon as George Brent and James Stephenson have performed the function of

15. Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (Everyman 1966, pp. 114-15).

16. Brontë, op. cit. p. 45.

17. Britton, op. cit. pp. 71-9.

18. *The Little Foxes*, of course, is also about a mother/daughter relationship, but it is not a part of the "motherhood" cycle initiated by *The Old Maid*. Davis's work with Wyler is very strikingly unlike the work with Edmund Goulding and/or Casey Robinson which is exactly contemporary with it. Indeed, the Wyler films may be thought of as a conservative counterpoint to, or commentary on, the "motherhood" cycle.



providing Bette Davis and Miriam Hopkins with offspring in *The Old Maid*, they are simply killed off — James Stephenson in a horse-riding accident and George Brent in an extraordinarily peremptory version of the American Civil War which consists of fifteen seconds of stock footage. George is even more cruelly exposed in *The Great Lie*, where he is set up against not only Davis but also Mary Astor at her most glittering and astringent, and once has made her pregnant with the child that Davis will adopt his plane instantly crashes in a region of the Amazon rain-forest which is presented as being peculiarly and unnaturally difficult to find. He is rescued from it for the purposes of the film's astonishing last movement, the theme of which is the spoiling of the happy ending by the renaissance of a phallus who has been rendered completely redundant and who only serves to reawaken the archaic social and emotional conflicts which have been overcome in his absence. Paul Henreid's only real purpose in *Now, Voyager* is to be the father of Tina and (as I will argue later) the agent of Charlotte/Davis's discovery that she does not actually want the romantic satisfactions with the interdiction of which, by her mother, she has previously identified her oppression. In both *The Old Maid* and *The Great Lie* the critique of the phallic function as the lover enacts it is both confirmed and amplified by a critique of the imagery and conventions of male-dominated generic narratives: the invocation of the war film in *The Old Maid* and, in particular, of the western in *The Great Lie* is absolutely fundamental to the films' meaning.

The signifier of the erasure of the phallus in *Now, Voyager* is, of course, the cigarette. Paul Henreid's famous cigarette trick may well be a phallic symbol, but those who giggle at it and enjoy their imaginary superiority to the simple 40's souls who didn't would be better employed in asking themselves what exactly it is about the phallus that is being symbolised. Jerry lights up for the first time, it will be recalled, in the cafe sequence at the beginning of the second voyage, and his instant reaction to Charlotte's expression as she smokes the cigarette he has given her is to declare that he wishes he "understood" her. His presumption is immediately placed by Charlotte's reply; and it is crucial that the male offer of the cigarette is explicitly associated at the outset with the attitude to women of which Freud's famous question — *Was will das Weib?* What does Woman want? — is the classical expression. *Now, Voyager* goes out of its way to be clear both that Jerry, in giving Charlotte the cigarette, is assigning her the position of Woman, and that Charlotte sees this and refuses to adopt the position ("He wishes he understood me!"). This resistance is, if anything, even more pronounced in the balcony sequence in Rio, where (as I will argue in greater detail later) Charlotte openly questions the value of the pleasures of heterosexual romance with which the offer of the cigarette is again associated. In the final sequence, when for the first time Charlotte hands the cigarettes to Jerry herself, the meaning of the cigarette motif is reversed — and that its meaning should be so reversed is the point of the motif. The image, which on its first appearance, signifies the erasure of Woman by patriarchal heterosexuality and the romantic discourses with which it is encrusted now marks the erasure of the phallic signifier itself; the cigarette is the consolation prize which Jerry wins

after he has submitted to Charlotte's decision that Phallus should be excluded from the house.

## HOW TO LOOK AFTER A DOCTOR

Charlotte's three lovers, then, are all types of the erased phallus; but there is a fourth man in the film — and Dr Jacquith/Claude Rains presents us with a rather different set of issues.

There are two kinds of doctor in American texts. The good doctor is a secular priest or deity who exercises the divinity's powers of life and death through his control of an impersonal therapeutic technology. The good doctor's religious affiliations are crucial, and it is hardly surprising that he has often found occasion to manifest himself as the Father and the Son — in *Dr. Kildare*, in the significantly-entitled *All Creatures Great and Small*, and in *Welcome Stranger*, where Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald reenact, as country doctors, their earlier partnership as Catholic priests in *Going My Way*. The power of life and death is the power of reward and punishment ("The Lord giveth and The Lord taketh away", as Jacquith puts it); and accordingly 'the hospital' is that lofty seat of social judgment (*St. Elsewhere*) to which metaphysical emergencies are admitted for remedial surgery and intercession, and for the tallying of the pros and cons of their reinstatement in the culture. Those of the good doctor's patients whose relationship to patriarchy is terminally contradictory expire under a cloud of pathos, but those who show promising signs of becoming normal at some future date are literally recuperated.

Even when his goodness is unimpeachable, the good doctor arouses ambivalent feelings. *Kildare*, after all, is an interesting name for a physician whose ministrations are supposed to be redemptive (*ça parle?*), and while there can be no doubt of the benevolence either of *Kildare* himself or of Dr. Gillespie, the very splitting of the good doctor into the Gods of the Old and New Testament bespeaks a certain disquiet about the implications of a secular figure who has usurped the prerogatives of the Creator. The Lord who giveth and taketh away is a God of wrath, and his adjudication of questions of morality has sometimes seemed excessively harsh: the critical role which 'the agonising decision' so often plays in medical narratives is evidence in itself that ideas of illness, cure and death are potentially troublesome metaphors for a process of normative social control.

The goodness of the good doctor absolutely depends on the enforcement of a rigorous distinction between 'the hospital' and 'the home'. The culture's ills are taken to a saintly shaman who is, precisely, elsewhere — outside and above them. The place of cure is in, but not of, the social world whose spiritual casualties pass through the good doctor's hands, and his otherness in relation to that world at once legitimates his power and guarantees the appropriateness and impartiality of medical justice. Characteristically, the good doctor is celibate, like the priest: he must not be seen to have any personal investment in the social/sexual arrangements whose costs and contradictions are inscribed in the



bodies of his patients. However, as soon as the power structure of 'the hospital' is in some way implicated in the power structure of actually existing society, and it begins to appear that the physician has some sort of stake in maintaining the order of things which generate illness, then the laws of ideological contradiction assert themselves and the good doctor turns immediately into the bad one.

The bad American doctor himself comes in two varieties — the doctor as charlatan and the doctor as killer. The former is a professional trickster who peddles confidence in, or passive resignation to, American capitalism by offering a fake ideal cure for its miseries: Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*, with his "Protean easy-chair" and his "omni-balsamic reinvigorator", is the classical example of this type, who rubs shoulders with the charlatan priest (both in Melville and in, for example, *Elmer Gantry*) and who is invariably identified with the Devil. The doctor as killer, by contrast, takes his science with the utmost seriousness, and he is continuous, not with the priest, but with another secular god, the Promethean scientist: Poe, as we might expect, is especially sensitive to this connection (*The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*). The murderous doctor represents a patriarchal authority which legitimates, and mystifies, itself through a discourse of objective rationality, and which derives from this discourse an impersonal warrant for the enforcement of the dominant power structures at the level of the family. For the bad doctor does not kill just anybody: James makes the point with his charac-

teristic precision at the very beginning of *Washington Square*, in the course of introducing us to Dr. Austin Sloper, the most appalling father in the history of fiction:

"For a man whose job it was to keep people alive he had certainly done poorly in his own family; and a bright doctor who within three years loses his wife and his little boy should perhaps be prepared to see either his skill or his affection impugned".<sup>19</sup>

Of the bad doctor's skill there can be no doubt, but his affection is another matter. Sloper is a misogynist, and it is logical enough that the exercise of the skill in the bourgeois home should be primarily associated with the oppression and destruction of women. In Melville's extraordinary short story *The Tartarus of Maids*, male control and exploitation of women's labour in capitalist production is explicitly analogised with male control of women's fertility through gynaecology; and in *King's Row* we find not merely one misogynistic doctor but two, both of whom confine their daughters to the house and drive them mad. For the present purpose, it is much to the point that the screenplay of *King's Row* was written by Casey Robinson and that one of the doctors is played by Claude Rains.

Of course, neither the good doctor nor the bad is an exclusively American type. Molière took note of the fact that the ideologies of bourgeois medicine were spurious as soon as

Now, Voyager





they had been invented, and many 19th century novels draw attention to the role of the medical profession in the subjugation of women: *Dombey and Son* is an obvious example. Nevertheless, the idea of the doctor has a peculiar resonance in American culture: Henry James, again, hits the nail on the head with devastating accuracy.

"This profession in America has constantly been held in honour, and more successfully than elsewhere has put forward a claim to the epithet of 'liberal'. In a country in which, to play a social part, you must either earn your income or make believe that you earn it, the healing art has appeared in a high degree to combine two recognized sources of credit. It belongs to the realm of the practical, which in the United States is a great recommendation; and it is touched by the light of science — a merit appreciated in a community in which the love of knowledge has not always been accompanied by leisure and opportunity".<sup>20</sup>

"The healing art" is the perfectly mystified bourgeois business, and the doctor — who is able to make a great deal of money from activities which contribute at the same time to the general sum of human wisdom — is the perfect culture-hero for a "community" which is single-mindedly but uneasily dedicated to "the realm of the practical" in which profits are realised. Both the avatars of the bad physician — confidence man and lethal guardian of patriarchal privilege — follow naturally from James's observations.

In *King's Row*, *Spellbound*, *The Locket*, *Guest in the House*, *Hilda Crane* and *The Cobweb* bourgeois therapy comes into the inheritance of bourgeois medicine. The critique of the institution of psychoanalysis so central to this melodramatic tradition culminates magnificently in *Marnie*, where Hitchcock explicitly identifies the analytic cure with male-dominated marriage as the two approved "houses of correction" for intransigent female sexuality. The famous free association sequence in which Marnie/Tippi Hedren exposes the authority structure of the therapeutic session takes place, with exemplary logic, in Marnie's bedroom, and Mark/Sean Connery's deployment of analytic technique to reassert his power is equated with the rape to which he has subjected his wife a little earlier in the narrative.

Inasmuch as they use analytic categories while deploring bourgeois therapeutic practice, these films define such practice as a reactionary appropriation of psychoanalysis. The analyst appears in the work, not as an agent of enlightenment but as a powerful representative of the social order whose disastrous emotional consequences the work has explored, and the films foreground this contradiction between two very different uses of Freudian ideas by incorporating it in their thematic through the recurrent motif of the male analyst's lack of self-knowledge. The patriarchal therapists of *King's Row*, *Spellbound* and *The Cobweb* understand neither their objective social role nor the nature of their own investment in it, and they are driven by a fear of the loss of power which they seek to expiate through the spiritual conquest of their patients and their families.

19. Henry James, *Washington Square* (Penguin 1981, p. 7).

20. *ibid.*, p. 5.

The extraordinary intelligence of *Now, Voyager* nowhere reveals itself more clearly than in the film's perception that the good doctor and the bad doctor are the same person, and that the heroine must exercise constant vigilance in order to prevent the one of them turning into the other. Jacquith, in fact, is placed from the outset: in a work in which the erasure of the phallus is signified by the smoking of cigarettes it is clearly significant that the surrogate Father's brusque intrusion into the female space of the Vale home should be announced by the sound of his discharging the contents of his pipe into a strategically situated urn. It is no less significant, given the symbolic status of the American doctor as a type, that throughout the opening sequence Jacquith should be at pains to win the confidence both of Charlotte and of Mrs. Vale/Gladys Cooper by denying, or at the least camouflaging, the fact that he is the American doctor at all. Both women insist, for their different reasons, that he is, and while we are left in no doubt that her mother is the main agent of Charlotte's oppression, the film goes out of its way to register the contradictoriness of Mrs. Vale's position (as the enforcer of a patriarchal law of which she is herself the victim) by allowing her a number of tellingly abrasive points against the medical profession in general and Jacquith's homespun rhetoric of nurture ("Are we flowers, doctor?") in particular.

Crucially, the film lays great stress on the fact that Charlotte herself, even in the depths of her prostration, is more than capable of subjecting the well-oiled bedside manner to exacting ironical scrutiny. Her very first line of dialogue — "Introverted, doctor" — cuts through the tracery of disarming euphemism with which Jacquith has just decorated his account of the social and emotional world in which Charlotte, after all, has had to live; and while Jacquith deftly parries this tactless reference to the vocabulary of his profession with a further display of rough readiness ("I don't put much faith in scientific terms: I leave that to the fakers and the writers of books"), it is plainly suggested that some of Charlotte's irony passes over his head. The admiration which, deprecating his own "clumsiness", he lavishes on Charlotte's ivory-work, provokes a response ("I should think *you* were the least clumsy person I ever met") the tone of which he fails to note, and the function of this tone is to offer to the spectator the critical distance from Jacquith's urbanity which the heroine is shown spontaneously to fix on for herself.

The import of these things is clinched at the very end of the sequence in Charlotte's bedroom when Charlotte, reduced to hysteria, asks for Jacquith's help and he denies that she needs it. Charlotte knows as well as Jacquith that she *does*; but the film establishes categorically that more is at stake in the women patient's being "helped" by the male doctor than the golden opportunity of learning how (in Jacquith's terms) to "bloom". Jacquith tells Charlotte that "a woman's home is her castle", yet Charlotte insists that he "came to pry" — as indeed he did; and later, while he contemptuously dismisses Mrs. Vale's defence of a "mother's rights" with the claim that "a person has rights, a child has rights", he emphatically does not refer to the rights of a woman. For Jacquith Charlotte is simply a case of the disempowered individual, and the failure of this diagnosis to make contact with the thematic of *Now, Voyager* is subsequently confirmed by Jacquith's correspond-



ing failure to grasp the implications of the film's title. For Charlotte, on the other hand, the relation with Jacquith is a relation of power, and her refusal to countenance any polite mitigation either of the desperateness of her own predicament or of the reality of Jacquith's authority as "doctor" inaugurates one of the film's major thematic motifs: at every point, Charlotte takes care to define the terms on which she will accept male "help" by making the nature of her own situation and her own needs transparently clear, whatever the cost in embarrassment and loss of face. Charlotte's insistence that Jacquith should do the prying he came to do is of the same order as her insistence in the aftermath of the Camille Beauchamp episode, that Jerry should know she is in the throes of a nervous breakdown and that Elliott Livingstone/John Loder should be keenly and uncomfortably aware ("You must think me very depraved") of the demands to which he must accede before Charlotte will accept his proposal of marriage. It is not only at the end of the narrative that Charlotte imposes conditions on the men who wish to have access to her. On the contrary, *Now Voyager* defines her early confessions of anxiety, disempowerment and thwarted need as decisive and enabling moments of self-assertion within the existing structures of social/sexual power which Charlotte will abolish at the close. In that she is intensely conscious of her own position in relation to those structures, and in that she forces those around her to become aware of the objective, independent interests of a person so situated, Charlotte is able to constitute herself as the agent who transforms them.

Thus Charlotte's acknowledgement of the real inequalities of power between herself and Jacquith embodies a logic, not of retreat and submission, but of resistance. Jacquith's "a woman's home is her castle" and his bluff disavowal both of his status and of the role which this status assigns to Charlotte are, in the circumstances, considerably worse than patronising: they actively obscure the twin realities of Charlotte's present subordination as servant/daughter to the mother in the home and her potential subordination as patient to the doctor in the hospital. Charlotte confronts Jacquith now, indeed, as she will later confront Mrs. Vale: Jehovah and Elizabeth Tudor respectively, they are figures of imperial stature who must be negotiated with, faced down, propitiated and outflanked. *Now, Voyager*, of course, is keenly aware of the difference between them. Mrs. Vale is an exemplary victim of the paternal power which she wields by proxy, and her resentment of Charlotte ("the child of my old age") is directly traced to her resentment of the wifely duties which have obliged her to have a late child in the first place. As a girl, Charlotte both presents Mrs. Vale with an image of her own real powerlessness and provides her with a legitimate object for retrospective symbolic vengeance and self-assertion, and the animosity between the two women follows inevitably from this fact.

Jacquith, by contrast, is the Father *tout court* — and the film begins, as it will end, with the staging of the Oedipal scene in which an ingratiating patriarch enters the "woman's castle" in order to separate the daughter from the mother. It is crucial for the whole subsequent trajectory of the narrative that while Charlotte agrees provisionally to leave the home she repudiates the father's seduction by announcing that she sees the seduction for what it is and that she is, in any case,

already a subject who is capable, despite her diminished resources, of demanding recognition on her terms rather than his. If, in particular, she compels Jacquith to "pry" into her erotic life, it is precisely to establish that she is already acquainted with the arcane mysteries of heterosexuality, and that to this extent initiation and enlightenment from the father will not be called for. The origins of the "Free Will Bill" to the passing of which Jacquith later refers go back to this moment. He does not have "enough power" to prevent Charlotte taking Tina away both from Jerry and himself because Charlotte has determined the foundations of his authority at their very first meeting. Appropriately, *Now, Voyager* leaves it to Tina, in the final scene, to deliver the *coup de grâce*. Before going off to dispose of Jerry, Charlotte asks Tina to "look after Doctor Jacquith" in her absence. "What a funny thing to say", Tina remarks as Charlotte walks away; "I thought a doctor was supposed to look after you!"

We may note, in conclusion, that this reading of Jacquith is confirmed by the treatment of the healing art in three earlier Davis films, all of them directed by Edmund Goulding and two written by Casey Robinson. In *The Old Maid* Dr. Lansell/Donald Crisp hovers on such margins of the text as men are permitted to occupy to sympathise with the custodian of the bourgeois family, Delia/Miriam Hopkins, at the expense of another Aunt Charlotte, and to propose first castration and then murder as the obvious remedy for the contradictions of patriarchy. The sole function of the doctor who officiates at Mary Astor's confinement in *The Great Lie* is not to deliver the baby but to tell Bette Davis how much he misses the presence of the anxious father and to fail to notice that she has usurped this prerogative herself. In *Dark Victory* Judith Traherne/Davis is besieged with the importunate claims of innumerable physicians, one of whom (Henry Travers) feels obliged to inform all who will listen that he "brought that little girl into the world", another of whom (George Brent) proposes to mastermind her departure from it, and none of whom can cure the mysterious, terminal feminine affliction which will allow her in the end to elude their grasp. Uniquely in the cycle of films about women with fatal diseases produced in the late 30's and early 40's (part of the point of which, as a rule, is the very absence — the superannuation — of doctors), *Dark Victory* takes the régime of male medicine as its subject-matter, and records the necessary failure of its interminable quest to know and to eradicate the portentous symbolic thing which constitutes the woman's difference. The object, from birth to death, of fascinated scrutiny and therapeutic intervention, Judith nevertheless cannot be saved; the prognosis is, and must be, negative: and in the film's magisterial final sequence Judith leaves her lover with nothing but the masquerade of 'wife' by means of which, at last, she claims the house for herself. The decisive difference between *Dark Victory* and *Now, Voyager* is that in the former the cost and condition of the heroine's "victory over the dark" is one of the cinema's few authentically tragic endings. Like Charlotte Vale, Judith finally makes her own history, conquers the home and sends the man away, but unlike Charlotte she must die in order to do it.

These four great masterpieces (the peak of Davis's incomparable achievement in the woman's film) form a tetralogy in



which medicine and compulsory heterosexuality figure as the two repressive disciplines which seek to organise the heroine's desire, her fertility and her relationships with other women in the interests of patriarchy; and the films may be said to move from the heroine's defeat and containment (*The Old Maid*), through various fantasies of temporary, provisional or Pyrrhic resistance and disengagement, to the successful achievement of practical self-emancipation in *Now, Voyager*, where the heroine reorganises the social and symbolic fields in her own interest, and lover and doctor alike are expelled from the text.

One small, but striking and endlessly delightful, detail in *Now, Voyager* seems to sum up the significance of this development. In a work in which the male bourgeois doctor figures so prominently as a representative of the social forces which separate mother from daughter, and women in general from each other, it is especially appropriate that the working-class woman nurse Pickford ("Dora, not Mary") should be Charlotte's first ally and accomplice in the early stages of her campaign to reinvent the power-structures of the patriarchal home. There is no equivalent for Pickford (the wonderful Mary Wickes) in the earlier films, and her meaning in the structure of *Now, Voyager* is reinforced by an implicit contrast with Jacquith's woman assistant at Cascades (Katharine Alexander), who invokes the authority of the absent patriarch to protest against Charlotte's first expedition with Tina. (Jacquith actually calls her "the chief of my police forces".) Pickford practises, not the healing art, but the art of symbolic guerilla warfare, and the film honours her contribution to the struggle against the *ancien régime* of "Queen Elizabeth" with a quintessential Davis line ("Dora, I suspect you're a treasure") which quotes the traditional term of approbation for the invaluable female domestic with a critically placing irony, and which could not conceivably have been addressed to a male member of the medical profession.

#### FROM VEIL TO VALE: THE RENUNCIATION OF THE MASQUERADE

Charlotte's experience of heterosexuality in *Now, Voyager* is very carefully and lucidly sequenced. Her surname is 'Vale', and the pun on the name is crucial to the film's meaning. If the very word psychiatry should fill her daughter with shame (as Mrs. Vale tells her that it should), that is because Charlotte has dishonoured the Name of the Father by being the first member of the Vale family to have a nervous breakdown. It will later transpire, however, in the course of Charlotte's last conversation with her mother, that she dishonours it even more by refusing to give it up; for the paradox of the female child's relation to the Name of the Father is that she can only become worthy of it by exchanging it, at the earliest possible opportunity, for the name of the Father's replacement. Where girls are concerned, to go through life with the Father's name is automatically to transgress the Father's law, which enjoins the daughter to put on, with a view to recruiting a husband, the mask of womanliness which is symbolised in *Now, Voyager* by the wearing of a 'veil'. Charlotte's discarding of the veil and her refusal to reproduce the patriarchal law by

discarding her name go together, and by the end of the film 'Vale' is no longer the Name of the Father at all but the signifier of the Father's exclusion. Hitchcock's Rebecca takes over the name 'de Winter' in rather the same way, and this shared female crime against the Name of the Father expresses to perfection the nature of the relationship between Davis's motherhood films and the Freudian-feminist melodrama. If Rebecca's attempt to live both within and against the laws of patriarchy is doomed to defeat, Charlotte's transcending negation of them is the corresponding normative victory.

The youthful Charlotte of the flashback defines herself single-mindedly in terms of conventional notions of femininity which she has derived from romantic fiction. "I only had novels to go on", she tells Jacquith. It naturally follows that she also defines herself in terms of what she thinks will be attractive to Leslie Trotter/Charles Drake: she dutifully immerses herself in his spiritual world by reading a manual on wireless telegraphy, and above all she makes herself available to him sexually because she "thought men didn't like girls who were prudes". While the feminine position which Charlotte quite consciously adopts in fact entails constant deference on her part to a set of imaginary obligations to the male, her investment in that position is plainly motivated by an impulse to rebel. She experiences her desire for Leslie as a means of asserting and liberating herself, and if she is never aware of her self-abnegation as such that is because she receives a sense of her own supreme worth as a gift from the man she has flattered: her "moment of triumph" is the moment in which "he placed me on a throne". The woman's reward for foregoing her own desire — or rather, for never discovering what it is — is the homage of the man for whose sake she has forgotten herself. The film stresses that Charlotte's instinctive tendency, at this stage, to assert herself by proxy through a romantically over-valued man not only neutralises her rebellion but conduces to its practical failure. The very mother against whom Charlotte is struggling has been "placed on a throne" by man, with the results that we see; and in that the success of Charlotte's resistance is entirely contingent on the readiness of the man to play the heroic role which corresponds to her own assumption of womanliness, she has nowhere to go when he balks — which he promptly does, at the mere sight of his superior officer.

The difference between this Charlotte and the Charlotte who embarks on the second voyage is marked by the fact that the masquerade as 'Camille Beauchamp' provokes feelings not of pride, empowerment and emancipation but of anxiety and discomfort; and we may compare the young Charlotte's eagerness to make herself prettier for Leslie by getting rid of her glasses with the sense of physical inhibition and constraint which Davis conveys so brilliantly in the scenes with Jerry which precede the revelation of her imposture. Before she left the Vale house Charlotte had seemed to be quite clear that the knowledge that she was unattractive to men was a major, if not the sole, cause of her misery ("What man would look at me and say 'I want you'?"); but the actual experience of being looked at and wanted is very different, and 'Camille Beauchamp' is the object of an inquisitive male attention from which Charlotte withdraws even as she incites it. Indeed, the main effect of the masquerade is to tempt Charlotte continual-



ly to disclose what it conceals, and while there is no doubt an element of self-laceration and self-contempt in her disparaging references to "Miss Charlotte Vale", they also express Charlotte's resistance to the expectations which her image creates in its male audience. It is even possible to read the *faux pas* that finally blows her cover as a Freudian slip which frees her both of the false appearance of urbane and sophisticated self-possession and of the need to undermine the success of her own performance through constant displays of abrasive irony. The enigmatic 'veil' of womanliness generates a self-consciousness and, above all, a sense of inferiority as acute and as painful as the clothes Charlotte wore in her mother's house, and serves no better purpose than to impose on her the new obligation of 'living up' to the requirements of a persona which, by this point, she does not even wish to adopt.

Mrs. Vale herself is the key to this development: it is of fundamental importance that Charlotte decides to permit Jerry to share her carriage not in the least because she is interested in him as such, but in order to defy, and retrospectively avenge herself on, the mother who blighted her relationship with Leslie Trotter, and whose image she conjures up at the very moment of her first meeting with her future lover. For Charlotte's masquerade embodies a contradiction: it is only for the male gaze at all inasmuch as it is primarily for the absent maternal gaze which would be scandalised by it, and Jerry recommends himself in the first place as the pretext by means of which Charlotte can present herself to Mrs. Vale as rebellious, autonomous subject. The film traces Charlotte's distance from and dissatisfaction with not only the literal masquerade as 'Camille Beauchamp' but also the experience of the second voyage as a whole, to the fact that this experience is from the outset a function of an earlier conflict with the mother which it does nothing to resolve, and the losses and defeats of which it actually confirms. Charlotte was once a non-subject for Mrs. Vale ("I am my mother's servant"), and the masquerade provides her with the golden opportunity to become a non-subject for Jerry: the male recognition which Charlotte thought she wanted in fact perpetuates the objectification she was trying to escape. In one of the film's most extraordinary moments, Charlotte is shown to acknowledge this within hours of winning unrestricted access to the lover her mother had denied her. Contemplating both the reflected image of 'Camille Beauchamp' and Jerry's desire to "understand" her which this image has excited, Charlotte repeats to herself. "He wishes he understood me!...He wishes...". Charlotte no longer feels that the question of who she is and what she wants can properly be asked, let alone answered, by a man: coming from Jerry, the question is (in both senses of the word) impertinent. Heterosexual romanticism defines Charlotte as a privileged object for the male, yet being "placed on a throne" in the mother's absence only confirms that it was the mother's presence ("He defied my mother") which gave Trotter's action its emotional significance. Charlotte's investment in her first great love was already determined by a demand for Mrs. Vale's acknowledgement of her self-hood, and this makes Charlotte's return to the home inevitable.

If any doubt remains as to the film's attitude to heterosexual romanticism it can be settled, perhaps, by reference to the

systematic conventionalisation of romantic imagery: Sternberg's treatment of Dietrich's idyllic vacation with Cary Grant in *Blonde Venus* provides a useful point of comparison. *Now, Voyager* is very much more helpful than Sternberg would ever deign to be, and as we are actually told that Rio Harbour is one of the few sights which doesn't disappoint you after the picture-postcards we only have ourselves to blame if we overlook the fact that the 'Rio' we are offered consists precisely of a collection of tourist 'views'. The harbour is dominated by a crude back-projection of Sugarloaf Mountain, and the statue of Christ on top of it (which the film might reasonably have ignored altogether) serves expressly as a means of pre-empting any tendency we might have to interpret the Rio episode in the light of Charlotte's redemption and spiritual rebirth ("There's something to rejoice your architect's heart!"). 'Reality' in *Now, Voyager* is the patriarchal home, and the film places the romantic fantasy of an escape from it in emphatic quotation marks. We have been prepared for the rhetoric of 'exotic Rio' during the flashback to Charlotte's first voyage. The site of Charlotte's first "tryst" (her own word) with Leslie Trotter is a sparse, starkly lit and very stagey set, and the flashback is introduced by a shot of the pages of a book being rapidly turned: the memory that follows is effectively indistinguishable from the contents of the romantic fiction which has taught Charlotte the pattern of the masquerade. While the stock shots and the back-drops to which Rio is reduced mark the second voyage, too, as an excursion into fantasy, Charlotte's discomfort inside the world to which she has previously surrendered herself is as marked as her resistance to the assumed glamour of 'Camille Beauchamp'. The shot of Charlotte and Jerry sitting side by side on the upper deck of an open-top bus, against a back-projected streetscape, is an especially striking instance of that tension between public professions of happiness and intimacy and unappeasable private disquiet which reverberates through the entire sequence. Charlotte is still caught up in a performance, and the film uses the unreality of 'Rio' both to express the heroine's distance from her own former ideals and to communicate this distance to us.

The film's evident disbelief in everything that Rio represents provides us with a clue, perhaps, to the meaning of a sequence which most admirers of *Now, Voyager* (including myself) would probably prefer to forget. It can hardly be denied that the painfully protracted and embarrassing comic-turn involving the Latin-American taxi-driver whose imbecility and incompetence create the narrative conditions in which Charlotte and Jerry are obliged to spend the night together points to a loss of control over both tone and material which is all the more jarring for the sureness of the touch elsewhere. The failure of realisation can neither be overlooked nor excused, but it is certainly suggestive, nonetheless, that the film loses its poise at this particular moment. The inclusion of 'the night alone' is thematically crucial, for it must be established beyond doubt that Charlotte and Jerry have had sex and that Charlotte has had the opportunity to sample the delights she will later refuse; but the film's disbelief in the value of what Jerry has to offer is so total that it is unable to approach the big romantic scene with even a semblance of conviction. In other social circumstances it might be possible



to represent the same event, from Charlotte's point of view, as a pleasurable sexual encounter without permanent, traumatic emotional importance, but bourgeois proprieties which have long survived the Hays Code foreclose such an option: the cinema of the 1980's is not exactly remarkable for its commitment to heroines who opt for promiscuous erotic pleasure outside marriage. The taxi-driver, and the laboured farce of lost ways, missed turnings, car accidents and language barriers, are the film's spontaneous and inarticulate response to a fundamental narrative obligation which it can neither avoid nor affirm, and while the results may be grotesque, they are not exactly the film's *fault* and they are even a tribute to its integrity. They testify, in their coarse and helpless way, to the completeness of the film's antipathy to the mystique of heterosexual love, and it would not be appropriate to take *Now, Voyager* itself to task for failing to find some way of endorsing female carnality without at the same time compromising its critique of the institutions in which (if at all) a woman's desire is allowed to have a certain notional legitimacy.

Still less is *Now, Voyager* to be held responsible for the fact that the balcony scene in which the Rio sequence culminates is universally remembered as a locus classicus of 40's romanticism: the evidence to the contrary is surely explicit enough. By any standard of comparison, it is a curious romanticism which inspires the heroine to recall the glorious moment when the earth moved with the bald question — "Was that happiness?" The film is evidently convinced that it wasn't, and Jerry himself is unable to offer a more pressing case in his own defence than the reply: "A small part of it, perhaps". Like the Rio sequence as a whole, the balcony scene continually insists on Charlotte's *alienation* from the signifiers of romantic feeling, imported wholesale, in this case, by the lover: she counters the rhetorical abstractions of ideal love by pointing to its practical costs ("You'll get burned, we used to say"). It is above all crucial, given the subsequent development of the narrative, that Jerry's love should continue to exacerbate Charlotte's sense of her own inferiority and that the scene should move towards an outburst of hysterical self-laceration ("an old maid's tears of gratitude for the crumbs offered") which is hardly distinguishable from that which followed the flashback.

At the end of the second voyage, then, as at the end of the first, Charlotte is still embroiled in the contradictions of a traditional femininity which holds out the promise of 'subjecthood' but which, in practice, revives the feelings of self-loss and humiliation it is supposed to assuage. Jerry has changed nothing: Charlotte was veiled when she met him and she is veiled again when she parts from him at the airport. But if the Rio sequence looks backwards, it also explicitly projects the narrative's goal: when Jerry kisses her at the climax of the balcony scene, Charlotte is already saying: "Please let me go!". It is a fitting conclusion to this exemplary romantic encounter. At this stage Charlotte cannot act on her resistance, but the function of her second voyage is precisely to dramatise her final disengagement from the fantasies left over from the first and thus to lay the groundwork for the film's great last movement — the *third* voyage back to the home, where Charlotte will seek to restore and repair the primary relation of love and solidarity between mother and daughter.

The meaning of *Now, Voyager* is embodied in a condensed form in its use of the conventional trope of 'the star entrance'. Davis makes three entrances — as 'Aunt Charlotte', as 'Camille Beauchamp' and as Bette Davis (as it were); and each entrance serves as a kind of tonic chord which announces the key of the movement that follows it. The entrances have a number of features in common: they are all organised as *coups de théâtre*; in every case, Charlotte is appearing for the first time before a major character in the narrative; all of them place the spectator in this character's position so that we share his/her experience of Charlotte's metamorphosis. The third entrance, however, is decisively different from the first two. The observers of the *début* of 'Aunt Charlotte' and 'Camille Beauchamp' are men: respectively, Jacquith (the only member of the assembled company who does not know what Charlotte looks like) and Jerry, the Father and the lover; though in the second case the male gaze is shared by the tour operator and Jerry's impatient fellow-passengers. On both occasions we are made acutely aware of Charlotte's discomfort at being looked at, and the invitation to take note of and identify with her self-consciousness and vulnerability distances our look from the man's. Where 'Aunt Charlotte' is concerned, this distance is produced by the thwarting of our expectations. Jacquith is waiting for Charlotte Vale but we are waiting for Bette Davis, and after elaborately preparing us for her with close shots of hands carving and feet descending the staircase the film gives us 'not-Bette-Davis', pathetically isolated in long shot in a composition dominated by the supporting cast. Our shock derives from the fact that 'Aunt Charlotte' is the negation of everything that Davis represents and it creates the initial discrepancy between our point-of-view and Jacquith's which the film will later use to place Jacquith's complacent condescension. Our reaction to the entrance of 'Camille Beauchamp' is also necessarily different from that of her male audience, which, unlike us, knows her neither as Davis nor as the 'not-Davis' to which she has been reduced in this film. The pan from feet to head which marks 'Camille's' appearance signifies her objectification by the men who are looking at her, but we have no sooner been implicated in this look than we are returned to the experience of the person who is being objectified. Far from cutting to long shots and thus confirming our position as subject of the gaze, Rapper holds the close-up of Davis's face as 'Camille' descends the gang-plank so that we see and share Charlotte's trepidation and embarrassment. If the men are looking at the masquerade, we are the sympathetic witnesses of the anxieties it generates.

Above all, of course, neither 'Aunt Charlotte' nor 'Camille Beauchamp' is an identity determined by Charlotte herself. Each is a persona which has been adopted under duress, in response to social pressures and constraints which Charlotte can do nothing to effect or regulate, and each makes her entrance unwillingly, only emerging from her retreat in response to a summons she has no choice but to obey. 'Aunt Charlotte', as her mother's servant, is peremptorily instructed to appear for family tea; 'Camille' spends the whole cruise shut up in a cabin which she leaves at the very last possible moment; and Charlotte is taken to task, in both cases, for keeping her prospective audience waiting. Rapper gives con-





Paul Henreid and Bette Davis in Irving Rapper's *Deception*

crete form to this complex of thematic ideas by emphasising Charlotte's *visual* subordination both to decor and to other characters within static compositions (as in the scene of her introduction to Jacquith), and by confining her movements to situations in which she is compelled to react to some form of external provocation. Thus while the crane shot which follows 'Camille's' descent of the gang-plank is motivated by her movement, it represents the very opposite of a command of the visual space. Charlotte is moving because she is obliged to, and any sense of spatial freedom which the camera movement might convey is firmly undercut not only by Davis's demeanour but also by the tightness of the close-shot composition.

The extraordinary dramatic power of Charlotte's third entrance is generated by the systematic contradiction of the common features of its predecessors, and Rapper prepares us for it by recapitulating the 'entrance motif' in the scene in which Charlotte is reunited with Mrs. Vale. Once again Charlotte is compelled to make an appearance which she dreads; once again her movement within the image is wholly determined by external coercion; once again she is up for the inspection of an inquisitorial gaze which, if not itself male, has nonetheless been co-opted for the interests of patriarchy, and before which Charlotte is ordered to display herself like a mannequin at a fashion parade. The sequence moves towards an acknowledgement of defeat ("You've thought of everything haven't you, mother?") which is immediately cancelled by the sequence set, not in Mrs. Vale's room (itself formerly occupied, we have been told, by the Father himself), but in the room Charlotte has marked out as her own, against her mother's wishes.

Just as Charlotte put on the mask for the male look, she now abandons it in the presence of, and for, the mother: the imaginary self-assertion of 'Camille Beauchamp' ("I was thinking of my mother!") is at last realised in practice. In a breathtaking display of bravura 40's *mise-en-scène*, the spectacle of Woman is literally abolished and the narrative itself grinds to a halt as Charlotte's two audiences — Mrs. Vale and ourselves — are left to await the pleasure of the subject who is not yet there. The equivalent, for us, of the 'nothing' which Mrs. Vale sees is Mrs. Vale's back: Charlotte's self-making deprives the look of its object and suspends the flow of dramatic time. When Charlotte reappears she has become Bette Davis, and she is no longer on display for approval, judgment or interrogation. The cut-back to long shot which isolated 'Aunt Charlotte' in the doorway of the drawing-room and the vertical pan which scanned and fragmented the body of 'Camille Beauchamp' are alike refused, and the camera simply follows Charlotte's movement as she comes back into the room, acknowledging her new control of the visual space. While Charlotte is obviously defying Mrs. Vale, the film takes great care to point out that she is not the least interested in *overpowering* her mother, whom she asks only to "meet

(her) half way". She asks for recognition as a subject *from another subject*, and in doing so she is rejecting not only her earlier position as her mother's inferior but also the position of the classical Oedipal rebel who asserts a rival claim to the possession of the phallus, and who thus defers to patriarchal authority in the very act of challenging a specific representative of it. Mrs. Vale is more than equal to a struggle for phallic mastery — and indeed, she proceeds spectacularly to initiate one by throwing herself down the staircase; but this is not the sort of battle that Charlotte is interested in fighting, and she repeatedly declines to participate in the kinds of resistance which the structures of the Oedipus themselves encourage. The Oedipal subject is defined in opposition to another who is *not* the subject, and in the scenes which follow, Mrs. Vale does everything in her power to involve Charlotte in a contest for dominance which one person can clearly win and the other can clearly lose. If Charlotte's demand for recognition explicitly distances itself from the Oedipal logic of castration, Mrs. Vale's counter-offensive takes the form of an attempt to reinstate it.

The contest very rapidly comes down to money: Charlotte's economic dependence on her is the highest card in Mrs. Vale's hand, and her use of the threat of disinheritance to exact Charlotte's obedience very obviously recalls *Washington Square*. Because she is a woman Charlotte, like James's Catherine Sloper, is in the anomalous position of having a legitimate title to money which she must at the same time earn by being a tractable and dutiful daughter. The source of the anomaly is the fact that bourgeois money is the economic basis of masculine dominance, and it follows that the inheritance of this money by a woman creates the possi-



bility of a very serious crisis of reproduction. The problem which exercises both Mrs. Vale and Dr. Sloper is that after the Father or his representative is dead, the recalcitrant heiress has just as much right to do what she wants with the patriarchal cash as the obedient one, and both parents are therefore concerned to find some means of guaranteeing in the present, while they are still alive, that their daughters will not abuse their economic power in the future. For Henry James, the heiress figures in work after work as an exemplary symbol of the contradictory and paradoxical position of women in a society which is both capitalist and patriarchal. In that she has a legal right to inherit, the heiress is recognised in principle as an autonomous agent; but in that the practical realisation of this principle endows a woman with the material power to determine her own destiny she is a potential threat to the social order which has so liberally acknowledged her legal existence, and men close in on her from all directions in order to take her power away again.

Now, *Voyager* takes up James's great theme and proposes a utopian reworking of it. Like Catherine Sloper before her Charlotte does not actually care about the money, and both women prefer to disinherit themselves than to accept the parent's ultimatum, which thus has the unintended effect of confirming the heroine's sense of her power and her capacity for resistance: Charlotte's discovery that she is "not afraid" is the crux of Davis's performance, and the turning-point of the film. Like Catherine Sloper too, Charlotte continues to live in the house as her parent's companion; but the difference between the two cases (a difference for which the sex of the parent is clearly decisive) is that Charlotte's refusal either to succumb to economic blackmail or to consent to an ongoing struggle for the dominance of the home provides the basis for a fragile and precarious compromise between Mrs. Vale and herself. They establish a *modus vivendi* the basic principle of which is Mrs. Vale's acceptance of the inevitable and her preparedness to relinquish a real for a theatrical authority: "she barks but she doesn't bite", as Charlotte puts it in a letter to Jacquith. Crucially, Charlotte has an option that Catherine Sloper doesn't. If necessary, she can work; and given the film's conjuncture, the importance of the fact that Charlotte's self-confidence is definitively secured in the context of a discussion about financial independence hardly needs to be stressed. In the event, of course, Charlotte *does* get the Father's money, and as she does not then lose it again through marriage, like many another Jamesian heiress, she is in a position to deprive patriarchy of its economic base in the final scene. The symbolic necessity of Charlotte's readiness to work remains. The film's entire project would have been compromised had it not been made clear both that Charlotte does *not* stay with Mrs. Vale for reasons of economic security, and that Charlotte herself is aware that material independence is the precondition for other kinds of autonomy.

The limits of Charlotte's compromise with her mother are brutally exposed when it founders, as it must, on Charlotte's rejection of heterosexuality. Her refusal of Elliot Livingstone's proposal precipitates a fatal confrontation in the course of which it emerges that Mrs. Vale has only agreed to "meet Charlotte half-way" at all because she assumes that she will be rewarded for her tolerance of her daughter's transforma-

tion with a prestigious (and lucrative) marriage. Charlotte has been free to do "exactly as she pleases" inasmuch as her doing so seems to please Livingstone as well, and her decision (as she marvellously expresses it) to "buy a cat and a parrot and live in single blessedness" can only appear to Mrs. Vale as incontrovertible evidence of the total uselessness of the female child. Charlotte's attempt to restore the mother/daughter bond through her relationship with *her own* mother is doomed to failure because Mrs. Vale has internalised the priorities of patriarchy according to which the autonomous woman, no less than the hysterical invalid, is mere waste, and Charlotte responds with an extraordinary diatribe against "mother love" in which the film's critique of the perversion of mother/daughter relations by the patriarchal family becomes explicit.

Charlotte has in fact refused Livingstone in an agony of ambivalence — not because she loves him but because she wants to have a child, and she has told him quite frankly that "when I marry you that will be one of the main reasons". It is not a sufficient reason to go through with the marriage, and at the end of the scene in which she turns Livingstone down (having first ensured his acquiescence in her decision through a calculated affront to his sense of decorum) she plainly states for the first time that she now defines herself as a woman who will never get married. Livingstone's function in the film is to be, unlike Jerry, available for matrimony and thus to offer to Charlotte the chance to become a mother on the traditional terms — terms which she refuses *before the new opportunity represented by Tina has materialised*. Motherhood within the patriarchal family can only lead to a repetition of Charlotte's relationship with Mrs. Vale and Tina's with Mrs. Durrance, and *Now, Voyager* uses the Livingstone scenes to tell us that although it is aware that it *could* propose some ideal reform of the family as a solution to Charlotte's difficulties, it has no intention of doing so.

## THE MOON AND THE STARS

One of the terms which occurs most regularly in discussions of the woman's film is "self-sacrifice". The genre, we are told — ad infinitum ad nauseam — habitually imposes renunciation on its heroines, in particular the renunciation of sex, and advocates in general the nobility and moral beauty of giving pleasure up. There are indeed woman's films which answer to this description,<sup>21</sup> but they are far from being representative; and when we examine the critical literature we find that films which do not answer to the description at all (such as *Blonde Venus*, *Stella Dallas*, *Camille* and *Now, Voyager*) are

21. *Jezebel*, in which the heroine is obliged to expiate her sins by accompanying her stricken lover to a colony for the victims of yellow-fever, is an obvious example from Davis's own work, but such endings, when they occur, cannot simply be derived from the nature of the genre. The punitive aspects of *Jezebel* tell us more about Wyler than about the woman's film; and it is relevant to point out in this connection that two of the most famous cases of affirmed female self-sacrifice, *Casablanca* and *Brief Encounter*, must be referred to the crossing of the woman's movie with the commitment film and to a specifically British petit-bourgeois addiction to the virtues of quotidian joylessness respectively.



repeatedly cited as exemplary of "the woman's film's" reactionary tendency to celebrate the improving effects of self-abnegation. The "sacrifice" formula tends to be popular with the same critics who like to inform us that Lisa's death from typhus at the end of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* represents a punishment for her sexual transgression — though we are not told why it was that the women of America (and of Europe, too) were so eager to see movies which propagandised for their chastisement and deprivation. That the heroines of *Camille* and *Blonde Venus* "make sacrifices" is obvious — but one's preconceptions about the intrinsic conservatism of "popular culture" must be exceptionally obstinate if one persists in the belief that the films in which these sacrifices occur define them as some form of moral ideal. It is hardly surprising, perhaps, that a genre whose subject-matter is the experience of woman in a capitalist, male-dominated culture should sometimes have occasion to dramatise situations in which the protagonist finds herself obliged to abandon aspirations and desires which conflict with that culture's norms and priorities, and more often than not the woman's film heroine "sacrifices" herself in response to social pressures which she cannot resist and which the work itself deplores.

Charlotte's alleged sacrifice in *Now, Voyager* is the sacrifice of the erased phallus. What she really wants (it seems) is Jerry — but Jerry is, with invincible decency and gallantry, married, and Dr. Jacquith, in his capacity as God, has placed this adulterous liaison under an interdict. Charlotte is, as she herself puts it, "on probation", and if she allows her overwhelming desire for her lover to manifest itself she will be deprived both of the custody of Jerry's child and of those few opportunities for platonic congress with the father that Dr. Jacquith permits her. The film's famous closing line — according to this reading — signifies Charlotte's acknowledgement that she will be obliged to make do with second-best. The moon is beyond her grasp: she cannot "be happy", that is, because she cannot have Jerry; but she can at least be married to him in fantasy, and construct in her imagination the idyllic patriarchal family, and the ideal sexual gratification, which she has been denied in practice by the stern dictates of a great social law.

It is not the least of the disadvantages of this account of the ending of *Now, Voyager* that it takes for granted an evaluation of Jerry which is strikingly at odds with that implied by the film itself. As we have seen, Charlotte has already decided by the end of the Rio sequence that the pleasures offered by Jerry are very far from being synonymous with "happiness"; and later, during the second sequence at Cascades, when she broaches the question of adopting Tina to Dr. Jacquith, she promptly tells him that her affair with Jerry is "over" without giving the slightest evidence of nostalgia, regret, ambivalence or emotional disturbance, and without suggesting that she has any lingering yearning for Jerry to overcome. Indeed, she herself introduces the topic of their relationship in order to clarify to Jacquith the nature of her interest in Tina and declares that the relationship is a thing of the past before the doctor has had a chance to forbid it. The film is quite clear throughout that Charlotte cannot achieve fulfilment through heterosexuality and that she is perfectly aware of this; and any reading of the ending which suggests that Charlotte is

constrained, under external duress, to "sacrifice" the supreme good of a sexual relationship with a man and make do as best she can with lesser and inferior satisfactions makes nonsense of the whole narrative.

It is the burden of *Now, Voyager*, in fact, that a sexual relationship with a man is *not* the supreme good, and that in the circumstances the stars, far from being an inadequate substitute for the moon, are distinctly to be preferred to it. Charlotte is saying, I take it: "There may well come a time when it is possible for a woman to enjoy complete social and economic autonomy, bring up a child which is not her own outside the family and conduct a sexual relationship without dwindling into marriage and renouncing all forms of activity except those which marriage entails. This time has not yet come, and for the present I have no doubt about the relative position of these things on my list of priorities. You may come and see us whenever you wish. Goodbye". *Now, Voyager* endorses this decision, which it offers as the only rational one, and the final scene moves triumphantly, not towards the heterosexual embrace but towards Charlotte's refusal of it, celebrated on the soundtrack by Max Steiner with a delirious dissonant interval.

The ending derives its extraordinary emotional power (which remains undiminished after innumerable viewings) from its repudiation of those forms of narrative closure in which the heroine is forced to renounce her desire to transgress, or in which transgression leads inexorably to death and defeat. Madame Bovary is the prototype of the female protagonist who, trapped by bourgeois domesticity, nurses impotent and self-destructive fantasies of rebellion and resistance, and we know well enough that narratives organised around such protagonists may have a potent critical force. In *Now, Voyager*, however, it is bourgeois domesticity which is consigned to the realm of fantasy. Practical life is reorganised along lines determined by the heroine, and the erased phallus, the traditional destiny of Woman and the patriarchal family are all shoved gently off into the Imaginary. This critical inversion of the archetypal melodramatic ending is one of the film's most remarkable achievements, and we are not invited to feel either that Charlotte is denying herself anything or that the new arrangements diverge in any way from the order of priorities which she has established. On the contrary, the source of dramatic tension in the final scene is the fact that Jerry represents a potentially serious threat to the realisation of Charlotte's wishes, and it ought to be enough (surely) to dispose forever of the "sacrificial" reading of the end of *Now, Voyager* to point out that Charlotte explicitly disposes of it herself. It is *Jerry's* reading; and Jerry's role at the close is to articulate for the last time the moral and emotional claims of the patriarchal order which is about to be eliminated. Charlotte both meets and displaces these claims by offering Jerry — again, quite explicitly — a ghostly paradigm of the old régime. Having first scornfully repudiated Jerry's suggestion that instead of devoting herself to Tina she ought to be looking for "some man who could make (her) happy", Charlotte then refuses to permit the actual realisation of the imaginative satisfactions she is prepared to concede: the "Please let me go" with which she responds to his attempt to kiss her is defined unequivocally as a victory.



Jerry will have a role in the new order — but only as that which is in practice absent from it.

The final shot beautifully sums up the narrative trajectory of the last section of the film in a single rhetorical gesture. The camera tilts up away from Charlotte and Jerry towards the stars — in a movement which is usually read (no doubt) as a signifier of romantic exaltation. The shot derives its meaning, however, from the fact that it exactly reverses the direction of the camera movement in the shot which ends the sequence dealing with Charlotte and Tina's holiday: here, the camera tilts *down* from the stars to show us Charlotte and Tina in a long shot, asleep in one another's arms. The movement *away* from the heterosexual couple completes itself in the movement *towards* a new form of the relationship between woman and female child, and thus a new practice of socialisation, in a world in which masculine dominance has been marginalised.

## CONCLUSION

It might perhaps be objected that the last thirty minutes of *Now, Voyager* are flawed by a certain schematism and conventionality in the representation of Tina, and there is a sense in which this objection is valid. Charlotte's transformation from the woman who asks "what man would look at me and say 'I want you'?" at the beginning to the woman who says "Please let me go" at the end is dramatised with a power, a lucidity and an inwardness which enforce our whole-hearted consent and which leave no questions to be answered, but it is certainly true that Tina is conceived primarily as a function of this transformation, and that she is never very clearly or specifically grasped in her own right. The nature and content of her relationship with Charlotte, in particular, tends to be taken on trust. That it is meant to embody possibilities which are radically new there can be no doubt, but it amounts to little more in practice than a rather generalised kindness and attentiveness on Charlotte's part and an equally generalised readiness to respond to such kindness on Tina's. The clearest indication we have of what Charlotte's education of Tina will entail for the girl herself comes in the sequence at Cascades in which Charlotte comforts Tina's anxieties about the fact that she is not "pretty" by telling her that true beauty is not a matter of one's physical appearance but of an inner spiritual strength and self-confidence; but the implications of this sequence are explored no further, and the film even seems to lay itself open to the charge of renegeing on its own convictions and its own logic by producing, in the final sequence, a Tina who is indeed a "pretty little girl" in the most conventional sense. Could it not be argued that Charlotte herself has feminised Tina for Jerry, in the best maternal way — and that therefore *Now, Voyager* has not only failed to substantiate its own claim that the new social arrangements are to be valued because they enable the abolition of patriarchal gender roles, but that it has also come perilously close to contradicting it?

That the film invites these questions is in a sense a criticism of it, and analysis is accordingly faced with the problem of deciding what weight the criticism ought to carry. I myself would wish to argue that the uncertainties of realisation in

the film's handling of Tina are inevitable, and that similar uncertainties are in fact very commonly to be found in works of art which have the courage and integrity to project a radical utopia beyond the existing reality principle. The uncertainty and the courage go together. *Now, Voyager* has demonstrated, after all, that the socialisation of women in the patriarchal family is invariably and necessarily disastrous, and that the only hope for Tina is to place her in the care of a woman who has renounced compulsory heterosexuality and who refuses to conduct any aspect of her life on the assumption that the desire and activities of woman should be organised by, or subordinated to the interests of, the culture of masculine dominance. Such a conclusion is in itself sufficiently astonishing; but it should, I think, be obvious that the ideological impediments to it are more easily overcome (given the traditions and conventions of the genre) in the case of a mature adult woman played by Bette Davis than in that of the little girl she adopts. It is at the point at which the identity and destiny of Charlotte/Bette Davis become exemplary for Tina that the film's touch becomes equivocal. To suggest that they *ought* to be exemplary (as *Now, Voyager* explicitly does) is one thing, but actually to show them being so is quite another, and the film steers clear of the explosive cultural problems involved in representing what Tina's upbringing by the kind of woman that Charlotte has become would be like.

Its hesitation is eminently understandable: a film which *did* dramatise the education of a little girl, outside the family, by a woman who has renounced the claims of patriarchy in all their forms could not have been made.<sup>22</sup> It is surely a sufficient tribute to the greatness of *Now, Voyager* that it says, with unmistakable clarity, that this *is* the kind of education which Tina should and, for her own good, must have, and we may excuse the film for its failure to enact this education in convincing concrete detail. Where the final sequence is concerned, it is indeed the case that Tina is presented to Jerry by Charlotte as a "little woman" in a pretty party-frock who asks her father whether he really likes her and who is promptly interpellated as "feminine" by the father's embrace. This is because the rejection of Jerry's Oedipal claims on Tina *must* — the dramatic imperative is absolute — be left to Charlotte: culturally, it would have been quite impossible to show Tina resisting, or in essence deviating from, Oedipal femininity herself. It can only be resisted for her, on her behalf, by a woman played by a star who embodies the values which Bette Davis embodies. Such procedures may look like failures of integrity or nerve, but they are in fact a part of what Gerard Manley Hopkins called "the sakes" of the work, and unless we are sympathetically attuned to the ideological problems which *Now, Voyager* faces we will find ourselves criticising it on inappropriate grounds. The film is fully aware of the problems itself, and it is immensely to its credit that it does what it can to address them through a strategic deployment of metaphor. Tina is emphatically left "looking after the doctor", and it is hardly reasonable to expect more than this.

22. One doubts that such a film could be made now. Von Trotta's *Marianne and Julianne* (which one can almost imagine as a Warners melodrama starring Davis and Mary Astor) comes closest, but with all its beauties — it is one of the few really great European films of the last decade — it does not get very much further than *Now, Voyager*.



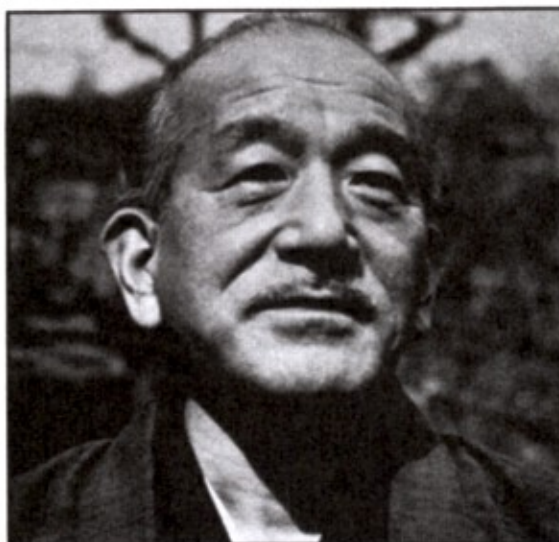
# The "Noriko" Trilogy

THREE FILMS OF OZU WITH SETSUKO HARA

by Robin Wood

*'They don't understand —  
that's why they say it's Zen  
or something like that.'*

Ozu on foreign critics



This article has arisen out of my great love for Ozu's work — his best films, for me, belong up there with the finest of Mizoguchi, Renoir, Ophuls and Hitchcock as representative of the peaks of cinematic achievement so far — and a general dissatisfaction with Western critical accounts of its significance. The first part of the article will examine the reception (in all its variety and contradiction) of Ozu's work in the West, then outline my own general attitude to his films; the second will offer a reading of three films from his late (post-World War II) period, *Late Spring* (1949), *Early Summer* (1951), and *Tokyo Story* (1953). The last two are widely available on video, and *Late Spring* can be obtained from Balzac Video in the States.



# I

## Ozu's 'Japaneseness'

It has become a commonplace in the West that Ozu is the most 'Japanese' of directors; it seems to me a commonplace that needs to be carefully examined and perhaps challenged. The reason usually given for Ozu's late recognition in the West is that the Japanese themselves considered his work 'unexportable' because it belonged so peculiarly to its culture as to be virtually inaccessible to outsiders. I have encountered this 'fact' a great many times but cannot recall ever to have seen a source cited: it may well be less fact than convenient myth. From the meagre evidence it seems more likely that, by the mid-fifties, **it never occurred to the Japanese to 'export' Ozu** not because his work was inaccessible (which it obviously isn't) but **because it was widely regarded in Japan as old-fashioned, conservative, and rather boring.**

It is more suggestive, however, to consider Ozu's alleged unexportability historically, within the context of what the Japanese *did* regard as exportable. We know that the (cinematic) gateway to the West was opened by *Rashomon* and its Grand Prix. It was followed by Kinugasa's *Gate of Hell*, instantly hailed as a revelatory masterwork, now seen to have been massively overrated, an academic piece with beautiful colour and costumes; by other Kurosawa period films (notably *The Seven Samurai*); and by Mizoguchi's late period films, *Ugetsu Monogatari*, *Sansho Dayu*, *The Life of Oharu*. The case of the Mizoguchi works is especially revealing because there is evidence that they were made primarily for the West and deliberately designed to win prizes at European festivals. (This does not of course account for their authentic qualities or detract from Mizoguchi's achievement). Though Kurosawa was at the time regarded in the West as the major figure in this newly discovered national cinema, the only one of his contemporary dramas to get any wide exposure or recognition was *Ikiru*, a fact I would account for by reference to its very striking structural complexity and visual rhetoric (this was roughly the period when *Citizen Kane* began to emerge from critics' polls as 'the greatest film ever made'). Minor (and to me not very interesting) works like *Tora-no-o* and *The Hidden Fortress* (and later *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro*) circulated in the West long before the far superior films noirs, *Drunken Angel*, *Stray Dog*, and above all *High and Low*. Similarly, the only contemporary film of Mizoguchi that received widespread distribution (at least in English-speaking countries) was his last, *Street of Shame*. It played in London at a theatre normally dedicated to soft-core pornography, with lurid posters of prostitutes leaning against lamp-posts in provocative attitudes and some such slogan as 'Night Life of the Orient!!!' I don't think one can attribute its exposure to Mizoguchi's reputation as a director.

In brief, what the Japanese assumed the West was interested in (and the assumption was by no means stupid) was the 'exotic': the Japanese past, with its feudal lords, civil wars, wandering samurai, strange attire, alien landscapes, elaborate ceremony and ritual, weird legends, folktales and ghost sto-

ries (*Onibaba* and *Kwaidan* were among the most commercially successful films in the West). And, conversely, if this assessment was correct, then why would we pay our money to see a series of films with confusingly similar titles about 'ordinary' middle-class people going about their daily lives in a contemporary setting, without even the benefit of 'striking' camera angles? — films that deliberately eschewed Kurosawan visual rhetoric, as an aesthetic principle?

I would argue, personally, that on the level of actual human emotional contact, Ozu is the *most* accessible to Western audiences of all the major figures of classical Japanese cinema. But we were supposed to want 'otherness,' and by and large that is indeed what we wanted. So why send us films that, for all the 'local' cultural variations involved, spoke to us very directly of problems inevitably faced by people living within a contemporary patriarchal-capitalist culture?

I am in a somewhat delicate position here. I don't wish to underestimate the importance of cultural difference, which gives Ozu's work something of its specificity. On the other hand I feel strongly that his 'Japaneseness' has been grossly overemphasized by Western critics. Claims for it have of course been made primarily (and correctly) on grounds of the peculiarities of his shooting/editing style, the aspect of his work that has, quite understandably, received the most serious critical attention. But, unless one is a theory-oriented critic dedicated to a search for alternatives to the classical Hollywood style, one does not go to Ozu's films to count the number of times the camera crosses the 180 degree line or to meditate on the deprivation (in the last six colour films the total absence) of camera movement. I am not suggesting that these things are unimportant: they crucially determine *how* we experience the films' narratives. But for most of us it is still the narrative that is our primary focus, the primary source of our emotional experience. We care, shall we say, whether Setsuko Hara is going to get married, and if so to whom, before we care about the height and distance at which Ozu has placed the camera, and I would dare hazard a guess that Ozu shared that priority. His films are not reducible to exercises in style.

I shall return to the question of style and its function later. I want first to consider briefly to what extent a study of Japanese culture is necessary for an understanding of Ozu's films. My contention — which will not be popular with scholars — is that, with certain qualifications, **a sensitive and responsive viewer can deduce from the films all that is needed, by and large, for a general understanding of them.** Such a viewer will not need to be told of the importance in Japanese culture of the figure of the father, the stress placed on filial duty, and the traditional (if archaic) belief in the impropriety of a widow or widower remarrying. What s/he will of course miss is the significance of a number of details, but when this is grasped it generally (in my experience) confirms the correctness of one's perceptions rather than contradicting them.

Let us take a somewhat extreme example, from Ozu's late silent film *A Story of Floating Weeds*. It is certainly useful to know that the beautiful old but flourishing tree, surrounded by mysterious (to the uninitiated Westerner) little white markers stuck in the ground, the scene of the young lovers'



nocturnal rendezvous, is a Shinto shrine, hence associated with fertility, nature, life-renewal, and that this contrasts with the figure of the Buddha repeatedly linked to the older characters, a symbol of resignation and acceptance. But does such knowledge do more than confirm what is already clear in the imagery, transculturally: the flourishing tree in its natural setting, the impassive stone figure in its gloomy interior? Nothing in the film suggests that we are to find deep religious meaning in these images, whose effect is more poetic than metaphysical.

A generous grant from the Ontario Arts Council made it possible for me to spend six months in the vicinity of San Francisco's Japantown — probably the closest one can get to Japanese culture short of an actual trip to Japan. During this time I was able to meet a number of recent Japanese immigrants, to view many Japanese films both in theatres and from video stores, some without subtitles, enlisting the aid of an interpreter, and attend performances of all the major types of Japanese theatre, ancient and modern: Noh, Kabuki, Kyogen, Butoh: mostly by authentic touring companies from Japan, including the Grand Kabuki itself. I also devoted a lot of time to an intensive study of Japanese literature, classical and contemporary, 'serious' and 'popular.' Much of this was extremely suggestive: I think important work could be done, for example (it lies beyond the scope of the present article), on certain parallels, not all obvious, between Ozu's films and the novels of Tanizaki. When I returned to Ozu's work I found myself feeling more at home with it than ever before, coming to it with a sharpened sense of context. Yet perhaps my most important discovery was that in all essentials my reading of the films remained unchanged and unshaken.

There are difficult critical issues involved here. It seems to me that, unless one is born and raised in it, one will always view a foreign culture as an outsider: even to spend ten years in Japan as an adult is not commensurate with being born into the culture. And Pope's familiar adage applies here: a little learning may indeed be a dangerous thing if we trust it too far. One can become so impressed by one's own supposed grasp of Japanese culture (after all, hasn't one devoted all that time to studying it?) that one succumbs to the temptation to interpret Japanese films exclusively in relation to it (Japanese culture encourages such-and-such an attitude, *therefore* Ozu, who is known to be 'typically' Japanese, must share that attitude), forgetting that much of what is important may be eccentric, critical, individual or anomalous. A knowledge of the culture is important as a safeguard against demonstrable error, but in the last resort critics must trust their own perceptions, their own sense of relatedness to the works.

It also seems to me true that *the value of a work of art can never be objectively defined and fixed: its value will depend upon its usefulness (when it ceases to be useful it can be abandoned to the scholars), and its usefulness will vary, both in degree and in kind, with the cultural/historical situation within which it is received.* Even if we could experience Ozu's films precisely as a Japanese experiences them (and *which* Japanese? — it is the grossest of errors to suppose that all members of a foreign race share the same perceptions), I am not at all sure that this would be desirable: we can only use the films if we can relate them to our own cultural situation

(without, of course, demanding a perfect fit!) and its problems, tensions, contradictions.

It seems relevant here to mention the work of the one Japanese film critic (as far as I know) whose work has been extensively translated into English, Tadao Sato, because I think in some quarters it has been assumed to carry more weight than it in fact deserves. Sato is essentially a journalist critic whose writings have no firmer basis than a kind of middle-of-the-road liberal bourgeois humanism (if there are Japanese equivalents for, say, Andrew Britton, Stephen Heath, Richard Dyer or Noël Burch, they remain inaccessible in the West). The resulting perceptions, though sometimes interesting, strike me as in the main casual and unsystematic, the value-judgements largely conventional. The quite widespread sense that Sato must be 'right' about Japanese films because he is Japanese has no firmer basis than a belief that, say, Judith Crist must be 'right' about American films because she is American. I see Ozu as far more complex and ambiguous than the conventional conservative figure presented by Sato (which appears to represent a Japanese consensus), and I refuse to be intimidated by the assumption that as Sato is Japanese he must know better. This is not of course to suggest that he is not worth reading: within the limitations of his position he is sympathetic and intelligent, and we can learn a lot from him about how Japanese films are received by the middle-to-highbrow sector of the Japanese bourgeoisie. I don't see that it follows that we must receive them in the same way.

I shall conclude these introductory comments by asserting that Ozu's films — at least the great ones — are indeed difficult. But only their superficial difficulties need be attributed to cultural difference. *Ozu is difficult because he is the finest type of artist: he is difficult in the sense in which Mozart is difficult, the difficulty arising from the complexity of the artist's apprehension of human life within a certain phase of cultural evolution and his openness to shifting cross-currents and conflicting impulses, and compounded by the deceptive simplicity and seeming transparency of his style.*

### Western Approaches to Ozu

It seems obligatory to begin with Donald Richie, whose pioneer work was instrumental in — if not quite introducing Japanese cinema to Western criticism — helping to make it accessible. Western critical discourse on Japanese cinema in general, and especially on Ozu and Kurosawa, stems from Richie even when it substantially departs from him, and his work established, for better or worse, how most people still look at Ozu's films. Unlike much 'pioneer' work his book on Ozu (published in 1974, but much of it had appeared in magazines considerably earlier) remains readable and stimulating, if open to disagreement.

We owe Richie an immense debt, and it seems ungrateful to go on to say that his influence has in fact blocked as much as it opened. This is not his fault. We live in a culture that calls itself democracy but which is in many respects, in the



very thought-patterns and attitudes it encourages, built upon interlocking systems of domination and authority. Within it, the critic (because he speaks as he must from a position of knowledge and expertise) is all too readily regarded as a kind of oracle of 'truth' in which the distinction between knowledge and opinion becomes blurred. This attribution of the wrong kind of 'authority' is all too frequently buttressed by the glib clichés of reviewers. I am looking at a prime example quoted on the back cover of Richie's Ozu book: 'Is and probably will remain the definitive in-English study of Ozu and his films' — the kind of remark it is illegitimate to make about anyone and anything, and which one hopes Richie himself would have repudiated. In such a culture, the critic is not to blame if s/he is not read critically.

Richie established two basic assumptions about Ozu that have proved very hard to undermine or challenge (they are plausible enough, and one cannot exactly say that they are 'wrong'): his Japaneseness and his essentialism. Here they are, conveniently combined in two sentences almost at the beginning of the book: 'In the feeling of transience, of the mutability and beauty of all life, Ozu joins the greatest Japanese artists. It is here that we taste, undiluted and authentic, the Japanese flavor.' That strikes me, in fact, as a sentimentalization of Ozu that obliterates most of the tensions and complexities that characterize his work. It may seem curious that the films are perceived as at once quintessentially Japanese (i.e. culturally specific) and about 'the human condition' (a phrase that recurs), conceived of as universal and eternal. But the apparent paradox rests upon a further assumption very common in the West (it seems to be shared by, for example, so different a critic as Noël Burch), the assumption that Eastern cultures are in some profound way superior, repositories of a deeper (or 'higher') spiritual knowledge and 'truth' to which we cannot expect to gain complete access. This turns up in the West repeatedly in the veneration for 'Eastern philosophies' invariably detached from the cultural realities that produced them. I was struck by this all over again when I recently visited the (very impressive) touring exhibition of Tibetan art: the very elaborate and learned programme guide presented the works exclusively in terms of a transcendent 'wisdom,' offering no assistance whatever to anyone interested in the material (social, political, economic) realities of the culture within which the works were produced.

From these basic assumptions about Ozu others follow, becoming progressively misleading and restrictive. Richie opens his introductory chapter on 'the subject and theme of Ozu's films' with the following sentence: 'Yasujiro Ozu, the man whom his kinsmen consider the most Japanese of all film directors, has but one major subject, the Japanese family, and but one major theme, its dissolution.' Again, such an assertion gains weight (and long life) from a certain plausibility: virtually all of Ozu's films are about families, and many (though by no means all) trace their dissolution. Yet its dangers become clear in the immediate sequel: '...the characters are family members rather than members of a society.' This appears obvious nonsense (how can they possibly be one without being the other?), but in reference to Ozu of all artists it becomes quite staggeringly obtuse. It's true that Richie

applies it to 'the later pictures,' but presumably he includes *Tokyo Story* (to take but one obvious example) among them, and it's difficult to see how anyone could watch that film and fail to be aware of its complex analysis and critique of a society at a certain phase of its evolution.

The emphasis on Japaneseness and essentialism also established — greatly to Ozu's harm, in my opinion — the inevitable corollary, that the values the films enact and endorse are in a clearcut, unambiguous way conservative and traditional. This view (sanctioned, after all, by the Japanese themselves) still appears to remain substantially unchallenged, the alternative view of Ozu's work as 'radical' being restricted exclusively to its formal strategies and stylistic devices to which the dramatic content is apparently irrelevant. The emphasis on the films' supposed embodiment of some form of transcendental contemplation also leads Richie into some very strange specific readings that seem quite at odds with the film's tone: one is pulled up short when one finds the conclusion of *Late Spring* — among the most disturbing and desolate in all Ozu's work — described in terms of 'untroubled serenity'.

Richie's book was followed in the later '70s by two other works on Japanese cinema that represent diametrically opposed approaches. They might at first glance appear complementary but prove merely incompatible: Joan Mellen's *The Waves at Genji's Door* (1976), dedicated to Donald Richie, and Noël Burch's *To the Distant Observer* (1979). Traditional aesthetics has discussed works of art in terms of 'form' and 'content'. In this case content analysis (Mellen) and formalism (Burch) signally fail to combine to produce a satisfying synthesis, both critics seeming serenely unaware of the deficiencies of their approaches.

Mellen offers a type of feminist-oriented sociology. It is only a slight exaggeration to describe her procedure thus: she gives us a plot synopsis, then tells us on the strength of it whether the film is conservative, liberal, radical, etc. Her intermittent (and always halfhearted) attempts to acknowledge the films' stylistic dimension manage to be both vague and irrelevant. We are told, for example, that in Mizoguchi's *Ozaka Elegy* ('his most brilliant pre-war film' — but one must assume Mellen had not seen *Sisters of the Gion* as it gets no mention) 'the mature Mizoguchi style emerges for the first time'. But what is this 'mature Mizoguchi style'? — the style of *Zangiku Monogatari* or that of the late works of the '50s? The two are quite distinct. If Mellen is referring merely to Mizoguchi's predilection for long takes (the one feature that unites the various 'periods'), that emerged long before *Osaka Elegy*. Or what is one to make of an unfortunately representative remark (it occurs in the discussion of *Sansho Dayu*) such as 'In a very deep-focus shot, reflective of Mizoguchi's sense of ubiquitous evil, Zushio marches with his men on Sancho's (sic) manor? I have been unable to identify the precise 'very deep-focus shot' to which Mellen imagines herself to be referring, and am quite at a loss to see exactly how (if it in fact exists) it could reflect a 'sense of ubiquitous evil'.

The plot synopses might be held to have a certain limited usefulness: if they tell us nothing about intrinsic artistic value





*Late Spring: the immobilization of Noriko*

(which is not Mellen's concern, although she occasionally dabbles in it), they are likely to reveal the major themes of Japanese cinema in specific periods and the preoccupations of major filmmakers. Mellen has researched her subject with formidable determination and energy, reporting on an immense range and number of films, many of which most of us may never get the chance to see. Unfortunately, even this limited usefulness proves seriously compromised when one happens upon the synopsis of a film with which one is familiar and finds it riddled with inaccuracies. The following, again from the account of *Sansho Dayu* (the spelling 'Sancho' is consistent throughout, suggesting that the character is Spanish) can stand as representative: 'As loyal and cynical servant of the Bailiff, Zushio is assigned the most despicable chores. He must take an old woman, Namiji, into the woods where she will be left to die. Because she is too old to work, the Bailiff refuses to feed her... Anju, unlike her brother, is pained by the cruelty, and wishes for Namiji that in her next life she will be born into a rich family'. In fact, three female characters appear in the sequence in question and Mellen has confused them. Namiji is middle-aged and by no means 'too old to work': she is severely ill, perhaps dying. There is indeed an 'old woman' (who eventually helps Anju to

escape), and it is she, not Anju, who expresses the wish that Namiji be reincarnated in a wealthy family. The problem, of course, is not with specific instances: when one realizes just how sloppy the synopses are of films one has seen (my copy of Mellen's book has fifteen question-marks penciled in the margins of the account of *Sansho Dayu* alone!) how is one to trust the synopses of all those one hasn't? Mellen's project, a feminist overview of Japanese cinema, is admirable, but its execution is so slipshod and breathless that one ends up questioning the book's value.

Mellen's view of Ozu is perhaps predictable, given the book's general crudity, though rather surprisingly the sections on his films are among its best parts, relatively accurate and thoughtful, conveying an attempt at scrupulous fairness toward an artist whose position Mellen clearly finds antipathetic: although seen overall as enclosed within a conservative-traditionalist value system, Ozu is at least permitted a certain complexity and sense of disturbance. The enclosure, however, is established in the very first sentence of her first discussion of Ozu in the book, and, significantly, it is given as received opinion, never challenged: Ozu and Kurosawa are 'said to be at opposite political poles' (p.35, my emphasis). The implicit assumption determines Mellen's treatment of Ozu



throughout the book, severely inhibiting any possibility of a free and open exploration of the films: to reduce the complex works of the artist to the (alleged) political opinions of the person is as great an error with Ozu as it is with Ford. That said, I shall not examine Mellen's treatment of Ozu in detail, preferring to let her account of *Tokyo Story* stand beside my own and leave judgement to the reader.

*To the Distant Observer* is a very different story: it is one of the very few books of film criticism to which I return repeatedly, and always with profit (if also with increasing dissatisfaction). Burch's analyses are always illuminating. I had assumed, from the films that are within my experience, that they are also commendably accurate (aside from the occasional trivial lapse, such as describing what is evidently a full-length shot in a frame-enlargement illustration — fig. 3 on page 162 — as 'waist-length'), and was therefore considerably dismayed by David Bordwell's exposure of some fairly crucial inaccuracies, in the book referred to below. Yet Burch pursues his argument with rigorous logic, and his book performs to a high degree what is perhaps the most important function that can reasonably be demanded of criticism: not the production of 'truth' or 'definitive' readings, but the opening up of whole new areas or aspects of an artist's work, or of 'cinema' itself, rendering accessible what was previously closed: the same quality that, for me, makes Bazin a great critic, rather than any great confidence in his theories. My problem with the book — and it is a huge one — is that I happen not to share most of the assumptions that form its premise.

It will here be necessary for me to outline what I take those assumptions (both explicit and implicit) to be, and I do so with some misgiving. The delicacy and subtlety of Burch's best work always makes my own appear to me, in comparison, ham-fisted, and I am afraid of producing a parody of his position rather than a fair assessment. It is important, then, that readers test my summary by reference to the original. (It is in any case a book which anyone with a serious interest in the cinema — especially Japanese cinema, but *any* cinema — should read and ponder). The basic assumptions seem to me to be:

1. That the 'great' or significant works of art are those which are *formally* innovative, exploring and extending the material properties of their medium, and that their greatness lies precisely in this.
2. That the material properties of film are those that it inherited from photography and developed into cinematography — camera movement, framing, editing, etc. — combined, subsequently, with the material properties of sound recording; they are not those that it inherited from the realist novel (which of course cannot be regarded as 'material' in the same sense). Narrative patterns and their realization, the direction of actors and the actors themselves, plot and characterization, the thematic organization of the narrative material, the ideological/political position of the filmmaker(s) as realized in the narrative development — none of these is among the 'material properties of film', hence all are irrelevant to an aesthetics of film. (This is where I begin to be afraid of lapsing into parody: Can anyone *really* mean this? Yet it is what I understand from Burch's writings).
3. That mainstream American, and most other mainstream,

cinema (aside from an occasional anomaly), from the point quite early on when its shooting and editing methods became organized into what have come to be called 'the Hollywood codes', must be dismissed *in toto*. The Hollywood codes render formal innovation impossible because they subordinate the material properties of film to narrative, and they have come to dominate the development of cinema all over the world.

4. Beyond this, however, there is something fundamentally wrong and misguided not only about mainstream *cinema*, but with the entire Western tradition that produced it. The ultimate enemy is the Renaissance discovery (or invention) of the laws of perspective, which impose on the spectator a certain way of looking and a delusion that reality is unified. All the major developments in mainstream Western art since the Renaissance have their source in this disastrous historical moment by which all of us have subsequently been victimized. (Therefore all mainstream Western art from the Renaissance on is worse than worthless, is actively reprehensible??? I don't think anyone has ever actually *said* this, but it seems to follow logically. The Mozart bicentenary might seem a fitting occasion on which to spell it out).

5. It follows, then, that the critic's task is to seek out alternatives to the mainstream: specifically, types of cinema that do not subordinate the 'material properties' to narrative, do not impose a unified vision on the spectator, and (a related concern) are not 'anthropocentric'. (I may as well say at once that I do not believe that any of these alternatives can be found in the work of Ozu). Such types should be the critic's only *positive* interest, his only duty beyond them being to explain as succinctly as possible why he rejects everything else.

Such assumptions obviously have drastic consequences, the first of which is the logical, inevitable attraction to the 'avant-garde', or at least certain forms of it. As we now understand the term, avant-garde art — works *deliberately* opposed to the mainstream produced by and for a small alienated élite, with no hope of or wish for incorporation or wider recognition, which would instantly defeat their purpose — is a purely twentieth century phenomenon. Earlier, 'difficult', 'advanced' or 'problematic' work (that of late Beethoven, for example) was regarded as the product of personal eccentricity rather than as part of a deliberately oppositional, more or less organized, movement, and eventually either would (Berlioz) or wouldn't (the later Blake) find its place in the mainstream, which it would then in the former case profoundly influence and transform. In fact, the richest periods in the history of art (and I would hazard a not entirely uneducated guess that this applies beyond Western culture) have always been characterized (like classical Hollywood) by the existence of an accepted set of conventions, forms and idioms which the great artists, far from simply rejecting, have *used*, often extending and developing them to the point where they are transformed: Shakespeare, Bach and Mozart will do as examples. From this viewpoint, an aesthetic that would logically produce, say, Michael Snow's *Wave Length* as a major achievement and dismiss *The Quiet Man*, *Rio Bravo* and *North by Northwest* as so negligible as to be beneath serious attention can only appear ridiculous. (I should add that, for my part, though it lies well outside my range of inter-



est, I do not dismiss Snow's work: intelligent people admire it, and I am convinced that a serious case can be made for it, from a viewpoint other than my own. One is so often taken as dismissing things that one is simply not interested in, which is not the same thing at all).

Burch does not of course attempt to enroll Ozu in the avant-garde. Perhaps the most impressive and valuable aspect of his book (though it is also perhaps the aspect about which one should be most cautious) is his loving re-creation of elements of a peculiarly Japanese aesthetic tradition in a kind of selective collage, to which the work of Ozu, Mizoguchi and others is then convincingly and illuminatingly related. The problem here is that the 'Japanese' elements selected (those most antipathetic to the traditions of the West), and their transformation into filmic practice, are then erected into an alternative to the Western modes, and it is clear that what Burch has in mind is not an alternative in the sense in which one might say that meat is an alternative to fish (so that one might choose one one night and the other the next): the implication here is that you must choose one and rigorously forswear the other forever. Personally, I experience not the slightest difficulty or unease in passing mentally from, say, *A Story of Floating Weeds* to *The Scarlet Empress* (they were made in the same year): both seem to me masterpieces, and I see no reason to reject Sternberg's film because the eyelines match and it obeys the 180° rule. At one point in his book Burch makes a disparaging comment on Western critics who 'make a fetish' of Hollywood genre movies. If one takes the term in its strictest sense — the isolation of a part, which is then separated from the whole and substituted for it, as a defense against full involvement — then the remark rebounds: Burch makes, precisely, a 'fetish' out of the formal elements he isolates from the films' total 'signifying practice'.

All this has drastic consequences not only for his attitude to Western cinema but for the films of Ozu and Mizoguchi themselves. Only a very small handful of films from their respective *œuvres* can be permitted into the Burch canon: to be precise, those made in the '30s and early '40s. Their post-World War II work is rejected virtually in toto (*Chikamatsu Monogatari* is of some interest for its experimentation with the soundtrack, not of course because it is one of Mizoguchi's most emotionally devastating films): Ozu's because the alternative practice rigidified into academicism (i.e. he was content to use the innovations he had already developed rather than continue to innovate), Mizoguchi's because he was guilty of the far more reprehensible act of capitulating to the Western modes (the fact that he developed them, beyond anything in Welles or Wyler, into a medium for the most delicate and complex expression, is of no significance). Hence none of the films with which this present article is concerned is accorded a single reference in Burch's book. Let me repeat, this rejection follows with perfect logic from his premises: it is the premises I find totally unacceptable. The effect of his work, for me, has been enormously to increase my understanding of, and admiration for, say, *A Story of Floating Weeds* and *Sisters of the Gion*; it leaves completely intact my love for *Late Spring* and *Tokyo Story*, or for *My Love Has Been Burning* and *Ugetsu Monogatari*.

I don't, however, wish to establish here any absolute or

clearcut opposition. Burch and I both present ourselves as 'radicals' in relation to Western culture and its cinema. The difference is not the simple one between rejection and acceptance. It is perhaps rooted in a deeply personal difference; he has been able to locate himself, psychologically, outside mainstream Western culture and I have not. That is to say that my own sense of alienation, while extreme, is not complete. Hence he looks at mainstream Western cinema from outside, and dismisses it; I remain within, exploring its products, probing its cracks and fissures, its contradictions, the ideological ambiguities of its greatest works. It would be as impossible for me to reject Hawks, Ford, Hitchcock, McCarey, Ophuls, Sternberg... in favour of a handful of Japanese movies, as it would be for me to reject Mozart, Beethoven and Mahler in favour of traditional Japanese music. Which would amount, in principle, to the same thing.

I am reluctant to comment on the work of David Bordwell, rather as I was reluctant to comment on that of Donald Richie: I owe his book on Ozu a considerable debt of gratitude (*Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*, Princeton 1988). My reservations are perhaps a matter of temperament, and to explain them I require a brief parenthesis.

Among serious writing on the Arts one can broadly distinguish three categories, which are not and can never be discrete but which serve somewhat different though overlapping functions: the theorist, the scholar, the critic. (A fourth category, the reviewer, is, in the vast majority of cases, discrete from all three). In practice the categories always merge, but in so far as they can be separated they can be crudely defined thus: the theorist develops theories, the scholar amasses information, the critic engages passionately with specific works and arrives at value-judgements. If I see the critic as the highest of these categories, I am perfectly aware that this goes quite against the stream of the last decades of serious work on the cinema (which have sanctioned an amalgam of the theorist and the scholar, attempting to exile the critic into the outer circle of journalism), and also that a strong personal bias operates here: I aspire to the (almost lost) category of critic, however inadequately. In a sense, the critic is a parasite, depending upon the theorist for theories and on the scholar for information: this is what distinguishes her/him from the reviewer, who is generally innocent of either theory or scholarship.

For me, Bordwell's value is that of the scholar, and his problem is that he appears to conflate scholarship with criticism. The point can be made by comparing him with Noël Burch, many of whose premises he shares, albeit more ambiguously. Burch's work has a strong basis in both theory and scholarship, but it is animated everywhere by the critic's passionate engagement. That is what makes it so exciting and challenging. Although I disagree with Bordwell on many things, I don't feel particularly challenged: beside Burch, his writings strike me as laborious and pedantic, with frequent lapses into obviousness (and he demonstrates yet again that one must never equate obviousness with truth): I have to confess that I find it very hard to get through them. I am sure that he, as a scholar, finds far greater deficiencies in my own work, my 'scholarship', such as it is, being very much that of



the magpie collecting the twigs it needs to build its particular nest (the nest, not the twigs, being the point). I have pillaged a fair number of twigs from Bordwell's book, which I use frankly as a reference work. Bordwell is clearly the outstanding Ozu scholar of our time: he is familiar with far more of the films than I am, and has systematically amassed a vast quantity of valuable information with a patience and discipline of which I would be totally incapable.

But I don't find him a very stimulating or illuminating critic. As far as I am able to judge, his descriptions of films achieve a high level of accuracy, aside from the occasional careless slip of which we are all sometimes guilty (for example, his confusion of names on page 311, where, in the closing sequences of *Late Spring*, Somya suddenly becomes Hattori, a character who makes no appearance in the latter part of the film). But one tiny slip, in itself trivial, seems to me revealing. In the exegesis of *Late Spring* (I am restricting my comments to Bordwell's accounts of the films with which this article is concerned), he remarks of the 'Noh' sequence: 'The scene ends with a bold stroke. Ozu cuts to a leafless tree outside (fig. 200)...'. 'Fig. 200', the frame enlargement of the shot in question that appears immediately beside this in the text, shows a tree covered with luxuriant foliage (it is even more striking in the film, because the leaves are stirred by a strong breeze). Presumably, the leaflessness crept in automatically, by a process of association: Noriko is distressed, 'wounded by the sight of Mrs. Miwa', and the shot '...privileges the noh scene as the turning point of Noriko's emotional response'. But, in my experience, Ozu *never* uses his transition shots in this directly anthropomorphic way, which evokes Ingmar Bergman rather than Ozu. A miniscule point, apparently, yet it epitomizes for me the general conventionality of Bordwell's responses as a critic.

Much more serious is Bordwell's failure (preoccupied as he is with formal elements on the one hand and the desire to relate the film directly to contemporary social developments on the other) to grasp that the whole progress of *Tokyo Story* is toward the formation of the embryonic relationship between Noriko and Kyoko, mentioned neither in his plot synopsis nor in his account of the film's conclusion (he refers earlier to their 'stunning final dialogue', but only in relation to 'explicit discussions of piety, kindness, and the nature of life').

The essence of scholarship ('pure' scholarship, as it is sometimes called, as if it were some kind of virgin birth uncontaminated by ideology) is its assumption of objectivity, its assumption that it has no political position, it is 'above all that'. Which strikes me as the ultimate in arrogance. One definition of scholarship (of course, a highly tendentious one) might be 'The mystification of politics under the cover of perfect neutrality'. I will highlight here just one further point, though I think it can stand for a lot more. Bordwell writes of *Equinox Flower* that it 'revives the theme of the loss of masculinity, setting its hero's decline against the quiet but assured authority of the father in *Late Spring* and the husband in *Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice*'. I would wish to substitute for the word 'decline' the word 'growth', and to point out that the 'quiet but assured authority of the father' in *Late Spring* leads to tragedy and is implicitly discredited. But I have never aspired to the neutrality and objectivity of 'scholarship'.

## Ozu's Style

Critics who wish to offer Ozu's cinema as an alternative to Western cinema tend at some point to define the latter as 'anthropocentric', with the implication that Ozu's is not. I have never seen this curious allegation explained — it is put forward as if its truth is self-evident. But if 'anthropocentric' means 'centred on human beings' (and I can't see what other meaning it could have), then it seems undeniable that Ozu's cinema is firmly anthropocentric: what are we to contemplate at its core if not human life? Ozu's films are centrally *about* social human relations — not vases or railway stations or trees (leafless or otherwise), and certainly not about mismatched eyelines.

What we know of his own practice bears this out. Those long nights drinking sake with his 'resident' screenwriter Kogo Noda were passed in the meticulous planning of the narrative development, the action, the dialogue, the characterization; and there is ample testimony to the care Ozu lavished on his actors, insisting upon endless retakes of the same simple gesture, movement or expression until it was exactly 'right'. If one wants to get at the core of Ozu's art, that is where one must look.

This is not to belittle either the importance of his style or its uniqueness (leaving aside the occasional imitator). But the purpose and function of the style is not to distract our attention from the characters and the narrative by displacing it on to something else: it is to define a very particular way of regarding them.

I shall not attempt here a comprehensive description of Ozu's style: it has been done before (notably in a groundbreaking article by Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, published in *Screen*, Summer 1976, to which everyone with a serious interest in Ozu must be indebted), and my aim is to right the balance and redirect attention to what the films are *about* (of which my account will be somewhat at odds with the customary shamefaced apology for Ozu's 'conservatism'). I shall simply list what seem to me its most *effective* features, commenting when necessary, then discuss the relationship it defines of spectator to action.

a. The static camera. This is the first thing Westerners notice about Ozu's cinema: the severe restrictions placed upon camera mobility. In *Tokyo Story*, the film most familiar in the West, for example, there are only two autonomous camera-movements, both very brief, the second so slight as often to pass unnoticed. One reason for this appears to be Ozu's preoccupation with the most meticulous composition within the frame, each object precisely placed, which camera-movement would destroy. When he abruptly (and irrevocably) switched to colour at the end of his career, this preoccupation became obsessional: there is not a single camera-movement in the last six films.

This self-denial takes two forms. Ozu rigorously eschews all those simple, 'lazy' camera-movements, purely functional to the narrative, that we are so used to from Hollywood movies — especially the panning shot: he will never follow a character across a room, and if an actor stands up he cuts to



a more distant position, refusing the convenient and more economical tilt up. But he also rejects those potentialities of camera-movement that Mizoguchi, for example, developed into an aesthetic principle: what we might term composition-in-movement. In rare sequences where camera-movement is used extensively and expressively (such as the bicycle ride in *Late Spring*) it is strictly incorporated in the rhythms of the editing, the shots brief, the movement unidirectional.

b. The head-on camera: squares and rectangles. The various components of Ozu's style, while they can be listed separately, are closely and logically interdependent. With the static camera goes the preference for shooting both décor and actors at angles of either 180° or 90°, so that the actors are either full face or in profile, the walls behind them seen as squares or rectangles, with few oblique angles. Again one may contrast Mizoguchi, whose compositions are typically constructed upon intersecting diagonals. The characteristic Mizoguchi composition directs the gaze outward toward areas beyond the screen, an effect greatly intensified by the frequent and complex camera-movements; the characteristic Ozu composition shuts off anything beyond the frame, directing our gaze inward, to the centre of the static composition. Hence:

c. The use of frames within the frame. Ozu habitually uses the décor of Japanese homes — the *shoji* (movable screens and partitions) and doorways — as framing devices within the cinema screen, intensifying the general tendency of his style toward the still life or portrait. Hence:

d. The preservation of the intactness of the cinema frame (though this rule is broken more frequently than the others — the first minutes of *Early Summer* are unusually free in this respect, perhaps because the characters who break the rule are the two naughty young boys). Characters generally enter from and exit behind the frame-within-the-frame, rather than be seen to pass the confines of the screen.

e. The absence of dissolves: an unbreakable rule, one gathers, since very early in Ozu's career. (Again, contrast Mizoguchi, who used dissolves with increasing frequency and often very expressively). The rationale is presumably the same as that for the refusal to pan: a dissolve destroys the precision and clear lines of the composition, producing a messy blur. Hence:

f. The development of transition shots (I was initially attracted to Burch's term 'pillow-shot' but have come to distrust it, the analogy with poetry seeming imprecise). Ozu's style evolved out of a desire to create contemplative distance, not disruption or disorientation, such as would be produced by replacing the dissolve with a direct cut to the next sequence with no indication of time-lapse or place-change. It would be interesting to know whether Ozu's development of this highly idiosyncratic transition technique coincided with his rejection of the dissolve, though probably too many of the early films are lost for this supposition to be confidently confirmed or denied. What one assumes originated as the solution to a simple technical problem rapidly evolved into an artistic principle: far from remaining a mere convenient transition device, each shot-series becomes, for the audience, a point of repose and reflection. These transition-shots are

never, in my experience, non-diegetic, though they may sometimes appear so as we watch them: in retrospect, we shall always find that they relate to the locations where the action takes place. Yet this initial uncertainty distinguishes them sharply from the simple establishing-shot to which Hollywood has long accustomed us: 'contemplation' must never be confused with an absence of mental activity, quite the contrary. The occasional cutaways to objects seen by the audience but not by the characters have the same function: the two oft-quoted shots of the vase and the bamboo-patterned screen in the Kyoto sequence of *Late Spring* (which Richie mistakes for point-of-view shots — the vase is clearly located behind Noriko's head, and it is not she but the spectator who is invited to contemplate it) are a good example, providing a moment of distance during one of the film's most poignant and emotionally disturbing scenes.

g. Camera height and distance. Ozu habitually places his camera somewhere around waist-to-chest level, and at a distance ranging between medium- and long-shot. Again, the principle is essentially one of self-denial: the refusal of extremes, the rejection of the kinds of camera rhetoric we associate with directors like Hitchcock and Welles.

h. 'False' eyeline-matches and the use of 360° shooting space. Perhaps it is perverse overreaction that makes me leave to very late those features of which formalist criticism has made so much — for this is where Ozu can be most clearly and *practically* presented as breaking the Hollywood rules. But I am concerned with how Ozu's style affects our relationship to the action, and from this viewpoint they seem the *least* important. My problem is perhaps that, discovering Ozu (like most Westerners) through the late films, where they are much less obtrusive, I never became conscious of them until I began reading Ozu criticism, and therefore experienced no difficulty in adjusting to them. Did they affect my experience of the films subconsciously, demanding more mental activity on that level? I cannot say, but would be happy to believe it. Doubtless my corruption, by long exposure to anthropocentric narrative from Sophocles to Scorsese via Chaucer, Shakespeare, Mozart/da Ponte and Dickens, was too complete. Burch (p. 159) tells us that, confronted with a practical lesson in 'how to' and 'how not to' by his film editor, Ozu remarked 'There's no difference', and characterizes the comment as 'cryptic'. Yet it is possible that *within the context of his own style*, Ozu simply meant what he said. Most of the components I have described have the effect of presenting each character separately, as in a discrete still picture — separated both by the editing and the framing devices. In a Hollywood film Ozu's 'wrong' eyeline-matches and the spatial dislocation of 360° shooting would be immediately jarring. But we need not go so far afield: they would be equally jarring in Mizoguchi (the Mizoguchi of any of his various 'periods'), because in Mizoguchi's films characters habitually share the screen, look at each other and touch each other, and their exact positions and the direction of their looks in relation to each other are hence of prime importance.

i. This connects to my final point, generally neglected by the formalists as it has nothing whatever to do with the 'material properties' of film as they understand them, being as



much a matter of 'content' as 'style': Ozu's characters almost never touch each other. Like his static camera, transition shots and false eyeline-matches, this is not in the least typical of Japanese cinema in general (as the most cursory glance at Mizoguchi or Kurosawa would confirm). It is, to an extent, a consequence of his particular, highly idiosyncratic, form of 'realism', the rejection of dramatically (or melodramatically) charged subject-matter in favour of the 'typical' situations of family life, but before assuming that this is 'typically' Japanese we might ask ourselves how often we touch other people in the course of an average day. (The answer, I think, would be somewhat, but not much, more than is customary with the Japanese middle-class: the Western tradition encourages the hugging, kissing and patting on the back of friends and family members a little more than seems customary in Japan). Again, however, it is clear that Ozu extends a simple 'given' into an artistic principle: the formal separation of his characters is so extreme that the rare moments of touch become privileged.

What advantages does Ozu achieve with this elaborate complex of interdependent stylistic components? There seem to me to be three.

1. I have already suggested in passing that Ozu's chief concern is to create a spectator/action relationship of contemplative distance. This might seem at first to approach perilously close to 'Zen or something like that' and, despite Ozu's stricture, I don't think that can be entirely avoided. I would, however, place the stress on what we are being invited to contemplate: not some ineffable eternal mystery but the concrete and often prosaic realities of life-in-society. The 'contemplative distance' does indeed place these 'realities' in a context one might loosely term metaphysical: the awareness of time, transience, death and an inanimate universe. But that is scarcely something mysterious, mystical, or alien to Western culture: one finds such awareness in, for example, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* or *Only Angels Have Wings*.

Involved, sympathetic and compassionate, yet always maintaining sufficient detachment to remain aware (of relations, of values, of issues both social and metaphysical): that seems to me to describe Ozu's attitude, and the attitude he wishes to communicate to the spectator (like all great art, the films are educational in the best sense, while totally free of any bullying or didacticism, and one shouldn't be afraid of the word just because the educational system under which we have all suffered has thrown the very concept of 'education' into disrepute). It also describes Noriko, and especially the Noriko of *Tokyo Story*, which suggests the absolutely central role the character plays in Ozu's evolving value-system. We might say that the purpose of the films is to invite us (with typical Japanese courtesy and reticence) to become the Noriko of *Tokyo Story*.

2. To adopt (if it is already available) or construct (if it isn't) an art form of the most rigorous discipline and deprivation is to make available the possibility of creative deviation from the 'rules'. In the former case one might think of Pope's use of the most rigid and convention-bound of poetic forms the 'heroic couplet', where he achieves the subtlest effects and inflections simply by shifting the caesura (the mid-line pause) or allowing the sense to run on beyond the line-end; in the

latter, of the electrifying effect of the solitary cymbal-clash at the climax of Sibelius' *En Saga*, simply because it is the only one. I shall argue later that camera-movement is one of the keys to *Late Spring*, and touch one of the keys to *Tokyo Story*. The latter provides a particularly fine example of the principle involved: if the characters touched each other all the time, what I take to be the film's climactic moment would go for nothing.

3. Ozu's camera is scrupulously non-judgemental. Every character is filmed from the same angle, the same height, the same distance, and the lighting is uniform for all. Those sophisticated technical means of angle and lighting elaborated by Western cinema to inform us whether we are to find the characters 'good', 'evil', admirable, monstrous, pathetic, etc., are rigorously refused. This does not of course mean that the films are 'neutral': no filmmaker in my experience conveys a securer, more precise (if highly complex) sense of values. What it means is that we come to share Ozu's judgements by sharing his understanding. In *Tokyo Story*, for example, the camera makes no distinction whatever between Shige and Noriko: we arrive at our (and, we must take it, Ozu's) relative valuation of them strictly on the grounds of their respective behaviour and its consequences, the most important criteria defined by the film's overall progress being emotional generosity and the level of awareness. If we are led to concur with Ozu's own implicit valuations, that concurrence is never forced upon us and is arrived at by our own mental and emotional activity.

It should be said finally that the combination of contemplative distance and the non-judgemental camera allows for considerable complexity and range of response. On the one hand it is very far from being the case that 'anything goes', that we are free to feel as we choose; on the other, the distance makes it possible to contemplate the issues and the values they involve from many sides. This does not entirely preclude what we are accustomed to call 'identification', but it strongly qualifies it: identification ('sympathy' or 'empathy' might be more appropriate terms) is arrived at gradually, so that it seems reasonable to claim that we identify with Noriko by the end of *Tokyo Story*. I think one can safely assert that this complexity and openness is not fortuitous, but corresponds to Ozu's own awareness that life is never simple. A related point is that there are no villains in his films, there are only social conditions: for example, the behaviour of Shige in *Tokyo Story* may be hateful, but we are led to understand fully why she is like that. This does not exempt her from personal blame (we simply do not believe Noriko, and are not meant to believe her, when she tells Kyoko that she too may become like Shige), but it places that blame in the wider context of social relations.

It is this openness that makes it so hazardous to stick political labels on Ozu's work — which is not of course to deny that, like all art, it has a political dimension, or to claim for it some kind of impossible neutrality. Neutrality is not the same as complexity. Is Ozu's cinema 'conservative', 'liberal', 'radical'? I think it permits appropriation by any of these positions — or all of them — and if in this article I stress its radicalism I am merely righting a misleading and (in the worst sense) conventional imbalance.



## II

'Has she ever been in love?'

'Maybe not. She only collected pictures of Katharine Hepburn.'

'Who is that?'

'An actress.'

'A woman? Is she a lesbian?'

(Laughter). 'She's very strange anyway.'

(Conversation about Noriko in *Early Summer*).

I must first explain why I claim *Late Spring*, *Early Summer* and *Tokyo Story* as a (loose) trilogy.

Ozu made six films with Setsuko Hara, of which these are the first three. They are spaced symmetrically in his career, one every two years (1949, 1951 and 1953 respectively), alternating with two films in which Hara does not appear; the subsequent three films with Hara are not spaced in this way. In all three, Hara's character is called Noriko, which is not the case in the three later films. And in all three, a leading thematic/narrative issue (the mainspring of the first two, secondary but increasingly important in *Tokyo Story*) is the pressures put on Noriko by the other characters to marry or (in *Tokyo Story*) remarry, and her resistance to this. I think it is possible to argue that *Equinox Flower*, Ozu's first colour film, relates to the trilogy thematically, and I shall discuss it briefly in a postscript. By that time, Hara was clearly too old to play the character who in important respects resembles Noriko; but is it coincidence that the character is now called 'Setsuko' and has the surname "Hirayama" (Hara's married surname in *Tokyo Story*)?

It may be objected that *Tokyo Story* stands somewhat apart from the other two films in that there Hara's is not the central role, the film being 'about' the old couple. Yet there is an important sense in which Noriko is (or gradually becomes) central there too: she, not the parents, embodies most clearly the film's positive values, the values that are being affirmed. That those values are somewhat intangible, resisting precise definition, is inherent in the project itself (and in the Noriko character throughout the trilogy), and is a strength, not a weakness: a mark of Ozu's intelligence and honesty. Also, *Tokyo Story* is closely bound to *Early Summer* by other links than Noriko. In both, the surviving son of the family is a doctor; in both he is called Koichi, and is the father of two young boys named Minoru (played in both by the same actor) and Isamu. In both films there is also a dead son, killed in the war (Noriko's brother and husband respectively), called Shoji. Finally, both grandmother and daughter-in-law (Koichi's wife) are played by the same two actresses.

Each film of the trilogy can be read as a variation on a theme. Noriko remains essentially the same character throughout, the variations arising from the different situations in which she is placed: increasing age, family connections, marital status, relation to the world of work and employment, geographic location (country, city). Finally, the trilogy is unified by its underlying *progressive* movement: a progress from the unqualified tragedy of *Late Spring* through

the ambiguous 'happy ending' of *Early Summer* to the authentic and fully earned note of bleak and tentative hope at the end of *Tokyo Story*. From a certain viewpoint the triumphant comedy of *Equinox Flower* completes this progress, though only by sidestepping the implication's of *Tokyo Story*'s conclusion, a move facilitated by the shift into the comic mode.

What follows is not offered as a comprehensive, let alone 'definitive', reading of the films. My aim is to trace the development of the 'Noriko' figure and the thematic complex of which she is the centre. I believe this will take us to the heart of the films' intention. (I write 'the films' intention' rather than 'Ozu's' not by any means to suggest that it could somehow exist apart from him, but simply because to most people 'the artist's intention' seems to imply a fully conscious design which preceded the act of creation. Anyone who has tried to produce works of fiction will know that the work's 'intention' is something you discover gradually, both in the process of work and after completion, and sometimes it needs to be explained to you by other people).

A word here about Setsuko Hara. Her place seems assured as one of the great movie stars, as surely as that of Katharine Hepburn and Ingrid Bergman, the two Hollywood stars with whom she can be most appropriately compared. Like Hepburn (albeit less aggressively) she is constantly searching for the means to independence in a male-dominated world; and as with Bergman, her screen persona is characterized by the radiance of her smile and an essential, irreducible 'niceness'. It is apparently customary in Japan to disparage her, and for precisely those qualities that are central to the meaning of the Ozu films: she is referred to popularly as 'the eternal virgin', a typical male chauvinist response to a woman who resists being defined by her relations with men; and cynics who cannot believe in innate human goodness find her insufferable.

### *Late Spring*

*Late Spring* was made the same year as Mizoguchi's *My Love Has Been Burning* — with *Victory of Women* (1946) his most explicitly and militantly feminist film. Ozu would never — could never — have made such a film, with its overt rage and passion, its all-out assault on the emotions, its explicit *partis pris*; yet it seems to me (I speak tentatively, as so many of the earlier films are lost or inaccessible) that a new awareness of, and growing identification with, the cultural predicament of women develops in the Ozu films of this period also, and it seems not entirely fortuitous that his professional relationship with Setsuko Hara begins here. Attribute this, if you will, to the American occupation and its demands for the 'liberalization' of Japanese cinema. But in the case of Mizoguchi, it is striking that he seized upon this to go much further in terms of feminist statement than *any* Hollywood film has ventured in *any* period; and the roots of this development are plainly visible in the earlier work of both directors.

A common account of *Late Spring* is that it is about a young woman, traditionally 'Japanese' and old-fashioned, who out of a sense of filial obligation determines to sacrifice





*Late Spring*: Somiya (Chishu Ryu) in the bar with Aya after Noriko's wedding

her own happiness to look after her widowed father in his old age. The film is doubtless accessible to various interpretations, but not that one, which is quite simply and demonstrably *wrong*: the kind of reading that derives from Western assumptions about Japanese culture rather than from any close (or even perfunctory) attention to the film. Certainly it is about the sacrifice of Noriko's happiness in the interest of maintaining and continuing 'tradition', but the sacrifice takes the form of her marriage, and everyone in the film — including the father and finally Noriko herself — is complicit in it.

We are left in no doubt that a strong mutual attachment exists between father and daughter (that we are never tempted to think of it as incestuous, even on an unconscious level, is doubtless due to cultural difference — it would be impossi-

ble to remake *Last Spring* in the West and avoid such a suspicion). The attachment is based upon mutual respect and affection, and takes the form of a kind of trans-generational friendship; in their first scene together they parody the traditional patriarchal authority/filial subservience ethic, treating it as play. Yet the film — if we look at it free of prior assumptions — also leaves us in no doubt that Noriko's determination not to marry is motivated by her own personal wish, her sense of her own good: if her father's potential loneliness is more than a mere pretext (they enjoy each other's company and the relationship is non-oppressive), it is never offered us as Noriko's prime motivation. Ozu's analysis makes it clear that with her father, and only with him, Noriko can preserve a freedom which the other options the culture makes available to



women would destroy: she can wander about the city at will, visit sake bars with male acquaintances, go for bicycle rides by the sea with unmarried men, enjoy a freedom of movement which is both physical and spiritual. The essence of this freedom, and what the society cannot tolerate (our own still has great problems with it), is that she remains undefined, except as herself: no identity in the form of social role is imposed on her.

The precise function of camera-movement in Ozu varies considerably from film to film (though we may be sure it always has one). Sometimes, as in *Tokyo Story*, it is used simply as a marker, underlining a crucial moment in the action: the film's two brief tracking-shots, around its mid-point, mark the lowest ebb of the old couple's fortunes, when they become literally homeless, just before Tomi goes to Noriko's for the night and the film's upward movement begins. In *Late Spring*, on the other hand, camera-movement has a clear expressive function, intimately bound up with the progress of the narrative. In the first half of the film there is (for Ozu) an unusual amount of it, closely linked to the depiction of Noriko's freedom and in two sequences conveying an effect of exhilaration.

(Parenthetically, one should perhaps distinguish between shots in which the camera moves because it is inside a moving vehicle — car, bus, train — and *autonomous* camera-movements, when the camera moves because the cinematographer moves it. *Tokyo Story* contains a sequence employing shots of the former kind — the bus-ride, when Noriko takes the old couple sight-seeing — and the sensation of movement there is clearly important, celebrating not the tour itself — the old people experience mainly discomfort — but Noriko's generosity. A further sub-distinction, in the former case, should be between shots looking out from the moving vehicle, which convey the effect of movement, and shots centred on the people inside, which do not).

The train sequence (one of Ozu's 'signatures' — I have not seen an Ozu film in which a train does not appear at some point) opens with a sudden burst of energy (and 'upbeat' music): the film's first camera-movement has the camera attached to the exterior of a train as it enters a tunnel, and the effect is repeated several times. The sense of liveliness is intensified by Ozu's disorienting play with the characters' positions inside the train: father and daughter exchange places (sitting, standing) in a series of shots that have almost the effect of jump-cuts. What is being celebrated is not so much the joint outing (the two will separate when they get to the city, to go their own ways), but Noriko's personal autonomy: her time is her own, unsupervised, with no explanations demanded, and when she encounters one of her father's old friends by chance she does not hesitate to go drinking with him.

The bicycle ride is even stronger in its expressiveness, clearly among the film's most privileged sequences: a whole series of varied tracking-shots (lateral, leading, following) among which is, rather startlingly, the only panning shot I have ever seen in an Ozu movie, involving us in Noriko's exhilaration as she cycles to the sea with her father's handsome assistant, Hattori — an exhilaration that has its sequel in their brief, humorous, innocent flirtation among the sand-

dunes. It is one of a number of scenes in Ozu which we read slightly differently in retrospect: while it plays, we take it for the beginning of a mutual romantic interest, and learn only later not only that Hattori was already engaged to another woman but that Noriko knew this all along (and, presumably, knew that he knew she knew). Her behaviour, in other words, was based on the assumption that she was 'safe', that no romantic involvement was possible: as soon as Hattori does manifest a romantic interest in her (inviting her to accompany him to a concert), she ends the relationship, and he is last seen listening to Schubert beside an empty seat.

In the course of the film — as the pressures on Noriko to marry begin to wear down her resistance — camera-movement becomes progressively depleted. It stops altogether about three quarters of the way through the film: the last camera-movement occurs during the scene in the park between father and aunt, the scene in which Noriko's marriage is finalized by her elders, where the trap closes.

The film's progress toward camera stasis corresponds to the cumulative deprivation of Noriko's freedom of movement, her energy, her exuberance, a progress that culminates logically in her own literal immobility, weighed down by the cumbersome traditional wedding headdress imposed upon Japanese women. The film could scarcely be more eloquent, though its eloquence appears to have been lost on those who insist on interpreting Ozu in terms of their own notions of 'Japaneseness'. Hara's spontaneous, open smile becomes hardened into a fixed grimace, and our last view of her has her reduced to a reflection in a mirror as she surveys herself in her wedding finery. Then Ozu caps even that: after everyone has left the room for the wedding ceremony, he ends the sequence with a shot of the empty mirror. Noriko is no longer even a reflection, she has disappeared from the narrative. The effect is that of a death.

We never see the husband, and all Noriko (who is barely acquainted with him) says of him is that he looks like Gary Cooper. Ozu deliberately withholds any indication of how the marriage will turn out; we are not invited to assume that it will be more unhappy than most. The point is far more radical: that the *institution of marriage itself*, as traditionally practised (and I see no reason to qualify that with 'in Japan'), functions as a means of subordinating and imprisoning the woman, her identity now socially inscribed as 'wife'. Noriko's freedom is a thing of the past.

If a 'traditional' Japanese expectation operates in the film, it is not filial obligation but the obligation of women to marry; for an exploration of the major alternative — to become a geisha — we would have to turn to Mizoguchi. We should have no difficulty in adjusting to this in the West, where the same 'obligation' functioned until not so long ago (and still does, in many areas of society), and where the mother/Whore opposition is surely familiar enough: the only real difference is that in Japanese culture the opposition has been more explicit and systematized, given 'official' recognition. As far as marriage is concerned Ozu — at least in the more woman-aware postwar films — makes a clear distinction based on his precise and practical sense of the potentialities within any given cultural/historical situation: for women of an older generation and from a non-urban culture, marriage was



endurable and even, within strict limits, fulfilling (see the mothers played so touchingly by Chieko Higashiyama in *Early Summer* and *Tokyo Story*) because they were raised within a cultural tradition that provided a strong traditional framework and offered no other option to the imagination. Marriage works, in other words, provided the woman — like Tomi in *Tokyo Story* — has been taught not to think too much. Even this needs further qualification: when the father in *Late Spring*, during the heartbreaking Kyoto sequences, helps Noriko to resign herself to her fate (against his own as well as her inclination), he tells her how he and her mother had to work for years for their conjugal happiness, and adds that her mother cried through most of the early years of their marriage. (For critics to assume that Ozu condones this seems a peculiar insult to his intelligence and sensitivity).

On the other hand, marriage (as traditionally practised) for an intelligent, educated and fully aware woman like Noriko is presented consistently as a tragic fate, a brutal curtailment of her growth. And a similar implicit verdict holds not only for a Noriko but for all women who have matured outside the rigorous indoctrination of feudal tradition: if there is a single marriage among the younger, urbanized generation in the postwar films that is depicted as happy and fulfilling, then it has escaped my notice. (We do have some hopes for Noriko's marriage to Yabe in *Early Summer*, but, as I shall argue, that is a special case).

Two facts from Ozu's biography seem relevant to his identification (or imaginative empathy) with the Noriko of the trilogy, and to his attitude to marriage. The first is widely known and familiar from most critical commentaries on his work ('safe', because it fits securely into Western notions of Japanese propriety): he himself never married, and lived with his mother until her death. Whether he nobly 'devoted his life' to her, as Westerners would like to think, or simply, like Noriko but with the privilege of the male's right of choice, followed his own preference, cannot be determined. The second has been scrupulously avoided by (as far as I know) every critic who has written on Ozu (I know of it only from a brief aside hidden away at the end of Richie's book, in the 'Biographical Filmography', p. 196, where it is instantly glossed over): he was expelled from senior high school for writing a love letter (in Richie's 'tasteful' words, 'a letter apparently as indiscreet as it was sentimental') to a younger boy. Richie's comment, typically liberal-homophobic, is: 'Such letters and such attachments among boys were (sic!) common in an educational system that so rigorously separated the sexes, and such sentiments are normal at a certain age' — the customary dismissal of the final healthy eruption of our constitutional bisexuality, before the process of repression is completed. Let me be clear about this: I am not suggesting that Ozu passed his entire life as a closet gay (we know that he had numerous liaisons with women). What this incident indicates is that (indeed like many others, which makes the phenomenon more, not less, significant) Ozu was able to remain in touch with his innate bisexuality at least until the age of senior high school — prior, that is, to the final stage of what is euphemistically called 'socialization' ('graduation' in more senses than one, entry into the work force, submission to the social demands for conformity to the heterosexual norms). He

was able, being an artist of exceptional sensitivity and intelligence, to understand very well Noriko's reluctance to accept a socially imposed identity and definition.

Noriko is associated frequently in the film with tradition and the past (it opens with her attending a tea ceremony). Yet she habitually dresses in Western clothes (the only, highly significant, exception being when she is costumed for the wedding ceremony) and her best friend is a young woman so thoroughly Westernized that her back gets stiff if she has to sit on *tatami* (when we subsequently see her apartment it is furnished entirely in Western style, with straight-backed chairs and sofas). Aya's function in the film is to embody the practical alternative to marriage for the modern Japanese woman: she is 'emancipated', independent, earning her own living. It is clear that both Noriko and Ozu find her very attractive: she is bright and vivacious, warmhearted, fundamentally well-meaning. But it is equally clear that what she represents is not a serious temptation: incorporation in the world of alienated labour under capitalism, in one of the subordinate positions available to woman (Aya is a secretary), is not a viable alternative for a woman of Noriko's depth and awareness — although, in desperation, when marriage is forced on her, she consults Aya about its possibilities. (The incongruity of Noriko as office-worker in a large company will be realized four years later in *Tokyo Story*). And Ozu shows the alternative Aya represents as illusory anyway: she is working because a man has let her down, and the implication is that sooner or later she will have better luck. Hence the irony (marked by one of Ozu's rare close-ups, Aya moving forward into camera) of her final appearance, when she impulsively leans over to embrace Noriko's father in the sake bar on the evening after the wedding: he has just revealed that he only pretended that he was planning to remarry, and Aya is expressing her admiration for his participation in the plot to entrap Noriko.

Of the three films, *Late Spring* is the only one that ends on a note of unqualified tragedy, the image of the empty mirror that stands for our last memory of Noriko answered by the desolate closing scene of her father's aloneness. The final shot of the empty sea is one of those moments when Western critics 'say it is Zen or something like that' (i.e., Don't worry about the misery of the characters, think about Eternity and Infinity). For me it functions both as an image of desolation and a reminder of the sequence (the first shot of which it closely mirrors) of the bicycle ride with Hattori — the zenith of Noriko's freedom.

### *Early Summer*

Of the three films, *Early Summer* is the only one in which Noriko indisputably occupies the central position: one might argue that *Late Spring* is shared equally between Hara and Chishu Ryu, and that in *Tokyo Story* Ryu is the central figure (both films, after all, end by focusing on the father and his lonely future) — though for me Noriko is the emotional centre of all three. As in *Late Spring*, the narrative is firmly centred on the pressures exerted on Noriko to marry, and once again



she succumbs. (Only in *Tokyo Story* is she able to withstand the pressures, and there only because she has a socially acceptable pretext for doing so, fidelity to the memory of her late husband, in the traditional, though by the '50s largely archaic, manner of Japanese widows). The tone, however, is somewhat different, the unqualified tragedy of *Late Spring* giving place to an emotional complexity one might justly term 'Mozartian'. One could apply to the film the description of Mozart by one of his most distinguished contemporary interpreters, the Japanese Mitsuko Uchida: 'You are never sure if you're in the shadow or in the sunshine. You are never in direct sunshine.'

This is perhaps as good a place as any to comment on the quotation from the dialogue of *Early Summer* which heads this second part of the article. The film is set in 1950 and Noriko is twenty-eight. If she collected photographs of Hepburn as an adolescent, we may assume that the Hepburn with whom she identified was the pre-Philadelphia Story Hepburn of the '30s, Hepburn at her most rebellious: the Hepburn of female activeness and self-assertion (*Christopher Strong*), of explicit rebellion against the male order (*A Woman Rebels*), of female bonding (*Stage Door*, *Little Women*) — 'lesbianism' in the wider, more comprehensive sense sanctioned by the Women's Movement. What appears to be a casual, humorous 'aside' is in fact immensely suggestive (and Ozu's immersion in and love of Hollywood cinema suggests that he knew what he was doing): all these aspects of the Hepburn '30s persona (see Andrew Britton's *Katharine Hepburn: the thirties and after*) are reflected in Noriko, and this is especially clear in *Early Summer*. One may even see the film as 'correcting' the 'happy endings' of most of the Hepburn movies, that have her capitulating to an appropriate male: here, Noriko chooses a husband because she knows she has to, and the film makes clear that she chooses the least of the available evils: as a 'happy ending' it is singularly qualified and relative.

I also find it extremely interesting that the issue of lesbianism is raised here, if only as a joke (though we have all heard about 'true words spoken in jest'). There is of course no suggestion anywhere in any of the films that Noriko is sexually attracted to women ('lesbian' in the narrow, purely sexual sense in which it is popularly understood and where patriarchy would plainly like to keep it, the wider sense being far more threatening). On the other hand, the films provide absolutely no evidence that she is sexually attracted to men: she tends to treat the men she likes — Hattori in *Late Spring*, or the man she marries in *Early Summer* — as friends. What one can confidently assert is that this snatch of dialogue adds a further dimension, a further potentiality, to Noriko's mysteriousness, our sense that, as a matter of choice, she eludes definition, society's habit of 'fixing' people (and especially women) by applying labels to them ('wife', 'mother', 'career woman', 'old maid', 'lesbian'...).

The generally lighter tone and the more ambiguous ending are reflected in the camera-movement, less systematic than in *Late Spring* but on the whole increasing rather than diminishing in the later part of the film, and at times positively playful. The film actually ends in mid-tracking shot, a gesture as far as I know unique in Ozu and rare enough in any cinema (indeed, no other instances spring to mind, though *Ugetsu*

*Monogatari* starts in mid-track). The film also contains the only crane shot I have ever seen in an Ozu movie (as Noriko and her sister-in-law mount the sand-dunes). And there is what I take to be (given Ozu's well-documented love of Hollywood films) a Hitchcock joke: after Noriko has made her own choice of husband, a woman friend induces her to seize an opportunity for a peek at the rejected suitor chosen for her by her family and friends, whom she has never met. The two women sneak up the stairs and start along a corridor, with suppressed nervous giggles. Suspense! Ozu cuts to a forward tracking-shot from their point of view, moving along the corridor toward a doorway. But then we suddenly realize that this is not only not the same corridor, it isn't even the same building, and the two women are not present... We never do get to see the rejected suitor, and never learn whether Noriko did either.

I want to discuss three aspects of the narrative: the family; female bonding; and Noriko's choice.

*Early Summer* is the only film of the trilogy in which Noriko is a member of a family. In *Late Spring* she has only a father (and an aunt, who lives elsewhere); in *Tokyo Story* she appears to have no blood relatives. In *Early Summer* she has a father and mother and a married elder brother (hence also a sister-in-law and two young nephews), and they all live together. It seems clear that, when he made *Tokyo Story* two years later, by constructing all the links detailed earlier Ozu wished us to compare the two families and draw conclusions about the relative harmony of the family in *Early Summer* and the multiple discords of that in the later film. Three factors are relevant: 1. *Environment*. The family of *Early Summer* lives outside Tokyo in a relatively spacious home in the country (Koichi and Noriko both commute to work), that of *Tokyo Story* in a cramped house in a somewhat squalid outlying district of Tokyo itself. While based in elementary economics the difference is not merely one of relative affluence/poverty: it makes possible the preservation of a sense of family, and of values beyond the crudely material. This is supported by: 2. *The presence of the grandparents*, who in many ways closely resemble the old couple in *Tokyo Story* (Chieko Higashiyama here is a Tomi mercifully spared the disappointments). It is a family still in touch with its roots, and with the finest of traditional values: Ozu certainly does not idealize this but he clearly acknowledges it. 3. *The presence of Noriko*. As David Bordwell points out, this has an economic function: in *Tokyo Story* Koichi is the sole breadwinner, whereas in *Early Summer* the family is also sustained by Noriko's income (she is personal secretary in a small firm, with a friendly and non-oppressive boss, a very different situation from her position as one-among-many in the large impersonal corporate office of *Tokyo Story*). But Ozu's emphasis, it seems to me, is far more on her personal attributes: her radiance, generosity, awareness. It is Noriko's presence that both vivifies and harmonizes the family, making it possible for its potentially discordant elements to be contained or neutralized. Discord, here, has its source in the elder brother Koichi (Chishu Ryu in one of his rare unsympathetic roles, looking twenty years younger than he did in *Late Spring* and thirty years younger than he will in *Tokyo Story* — it would be impossible to guess the actor's real age from the films): stiff, humourless, and



essentially mean-spirited (see the 'moral lesson' he tries to teach his children, by presenting them with a wrapped-up loaf of bread when he knows they are eagerly anticipating model railway tracks — a moral lesson that precipitates their attempt to run away), he embodies 'traditional' values at their worst, most inflexible and oppressive. One guesses that for Ozu his view that modern women (as represented by his wife and Noriko) have become 'impudent' because they stand up to men is particularly damning. He is made bearable only by Noriko's consistent refusal to take him seriously, which is all that prevents him from assuming the dominant role in the household to which he clearly aspires. Most interesting of all is the difference in attitude to Minoru and Isamu, because, superficially at least, their behaviour in the two films seems as identical as their names: lively, rebellious, habitually insolent to their elders. In *Early Summer* this is treated humorously, with great affection, by Ozu and by the adults in the film (their father always excepted): we are clearly intended, taking our cue from Noriko, to side with them against Koichi. In *Tokyo Story* the insubordination becomes ugly, the boys expressing an impotent resentment of an adult world that treats them without respect, consideration or even interest, as non-persons; there is no Noriko to take their part.

Noriko's role vis-à-vis the family constitutes a variation on her role vis-à-vis the father in *Late Spring*: she is content, she has a sense of *belonging*, she feels useful. The major difference is that there is less emphasis on her freedom, her time being largely shared between work and family. When she marries, the family breaks up, the old couple moving to a remote country area, Koichi and his family also, we assume, moving out from a house they can no longer afford and which is now too big for them — do we assume they move into Tokyo, nearer his work? In retrospect, the ending looks very like preparation for the familial situation that forms the starting-point of *Tokyo Story* — one sees, at any rate, how the germ of the later film is already present.

The use Noriko makes of her limited freedom permits Ozu to develop a theme barely sketched in *Late Spring* (Noriko's relationship with Aya) and which will acquire particular resonance at the end of *Tokyo Story*: female bonding. It is introduced shortly after the family and its dynamics, in the scene where Noriko and her brother and sister-in-law eat out in a restaurant prior to meeting the uncle from the country: the two women band together to criticize and tease Koichi, deflating his male ego and stiff, artificial dignity. It is Noriko who is able both to attack her brother and maintain throughout a humorous, bantering tone; we sense that his wife alone would either have preserved a resentful but submissive silence or provoked an ugly scene. The sequence adds a new dimension to the critique of marriage (from the woman's viewpoint) initiated in *Late Spring*, and this is developed in a subsequent scene where Noriko (parents and uncle safely ensconced in a Kabuki theatre) consorts with two of her female friends, one married, the other not. Their conviviality swiftly modulates into a conversation in which the married woman, very defensively aggressive, tries to assert her superior position over the other two who have not been fortunate enough so far as to acquire husbands, an attempt they greet with cheerful ridicule. The party swiftly breaks up, and we are left to reflect

upon the destructive effect marriage has on women's friendships, Ozu (that diehard old fuddy-duddy advocate of the good old feudal values) here anticipating the theme of Claudia Weill's explicitly feminist *Girlfriends* by over a quarter of a century. I admire Weill's movie, but have to say that it does nothing that Ozu had not already done better.

As in *Late Spring*, the film analyzes the way in which the pressures build up: Noriko is twenty-eight — past 'late spring' now and well on into 'early summer' — and the duty of the Japanese woman to marry cannot be postponed much longer. Her boss, always helpful and benevolent, provides a suitor who, although twelve years older than Noriko, has all the appropriate and desirable advantages ('handsome, a golfer' — what woman could resist?), and her family, after having him investigated in the approved Japanese manner and ascertaining that he is a respectable and extremely prosperous businessman, accept him gratefully: indeed, he is exactly the match of which a Koichi would approve. But Noriko is somewhat older than she was in *Late Spring*, more experienced and mature, her independence less vulnerable. She responds by choosing her own husband, without even the courtesy of a family consultation.

The man she chooses is anything but a 'good match': far from rich, a widower with two young children (interestingly, two girls, in contrast to Minoru and Isamu), not especially handsome and not even (as far as we know) a golfer: Koichi's assistant in his medical practice. Worse, he is about to leave for the wilds to start a new hospital: even Noriko's closest friend cannot understand how she can give up city sophistication for a life in the boondocks. He is, in fact, a variation on the Hattori of *Late Spring*, the man with whom Noriko took her bicycle ride, there the *father's* assistant (but father and brother are both Chishu Ryu). Here, he is unencumbered by any prior engagement: in fact, he seems a confirmed bachelor (or rather a confirmed widower), and, although when his mother informs him that Noriko has announced that she will marry him he acquiesces, he seems somewhat low on enthusiasm.

Why does Noriko choose him, and stick to her choice against all her family's hostility? Her friend tries to insist that she's 'in love', but Noriko continues to deny it (even when the friend threatens to hit her and chases her around a table trying to carry out the threat); the most she will concede is that 'I know him well and can trust him' — a rejection, in other words, of the traditional arranged marriage which the Setsuko of *Equinox Flower* will carry further, though there in the name of love. Negatively, Noriko knows she is going to have to get married and opts for the least of the available evils. Yabe's lack of enthusiasm (it is clear that he likes Noriko and enjoys her company) could be due to his understanding of this, which is not exactly flattering — or simply to his sense that he is in a singularly unfavourable position to enter upon a new marriage (Ozu, characteristically, withholds any explanation). There are, however, positive aspects, one being precisely that Noriko is not 'in love', with all the emotional dependency that condition implies. She sees Yabe — as in *Late Spring* she saw Hattori — essentially as a friend to whom she can relate on terms of equality. This is underlined by the fact that she connects him to her dead brother Shoji, who was



his close friend: if one *must* have a husband, a brother-figure will be less oppressive than a father-figure. There is also the sense that Yabe is a serious and responsible man whom Noriko respects and who will be engaged in valuable and perhaps arduous work, in a new enterprise: the Noriko with whom we are familiar would find that far more appealing than becoming the wife of an affluent businessman who needs her, if at all, simply as a social ornament.

Hence the Mozartian, shadow-and-sunshine, tone of the film's closing sequences. As marriage goes, Ozu seems to be suggesting, we can hold out some degree of hope for this one, in that it differs significantly from either the arranged marriage or the love-match: he doesn't encourage us to put it higher than than. Against this, there is the dissolution of the family (not only its physical dispersal but the removal of its source of uneasy harmony), the isolation of the old couple, the depressing prognosis for Koichi's wife and kids; and the sense that Noriko has accepted a certain loss for an uncertain gain.

### *Tokyo Story*

I want here to make explicit certain concepts that underpin my reading of the entire trilogy but which become particularly suggestive in relation to *Tokyo Story*: the Marxist concepts of the 'dominant' the 'residual' and the 'emergent', as formulated by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature*. The terms — which can be applied, for purposes of analysis, to any culture at any point in its history and, by extension, to any of its products — are perhaps self-explanatory, but, briefly: the 'dominant' refers to the entire multi-level complex of material practices, assumptions, beliefs, values, dominant in a culture at a given historical moment, the 'residual' to those elements left over from the past but still continuing to exist and preserve some degree of potency. The 'emergent' refers to those factors that point or move toward a possible future — by definition much harder to define than the other

*Tokyo Story*: Hirayama and Tomi on the sea wall at Atami





two categories, because they haven't yet quite 'emerged', are not fully formulated. According to Williams, when the 'dominant' becomes completely unacceptable it is possible for the 'residual' and the 'emergent' to form an uneasy and temporary alliance against it.

This can be applied to *Tokyo Story* with particular precision and clarity. The 'dominant' is represented by the values of postwar, Americanized Tokyo, built upon a brutal capitalist economy and a crass materialism that debases all human relationships (it is also, by and large, the world with which all of us are familiar today). The 'residual' is represented by the little, tranquil, obsolete world of Onomichi and the values of the old couple who live there. The 'emergent' is represented by Noriko and, especially, by the relationship that begins to develop between her and the youngest child, the schoolteacher Kyoko.

But this needs qualification: in fact, throughout the trilogy, the residual and the emergent meet and harmonize in Noriko

#### *Tokyo Story*



(which is, among other things, a way of defining the complexity and richness of the characterization). Noriko is usually seen by critics simply as the embodiment of traditional values and of Ozu's 'conservatism', but this is really too simple. She has managed to retain and develop the finest humane values which the modern capitalist world, fostering greed, competition and materialism above everything, tramples underfoot: consideration, the ability to care and empathize, above all perhaps awareness. But she habitually dresses in Western-style clothes, consistently resists the traditional destiny of a woman, and is able to acclimatize herself to life in the modern world, in which in *Tokyo Story* she successfully holds down a nine-to-five job as an office worker. The Noriko of *Tokyo Story* would feel just as trapped, would be just as much an anomaly, in Onomichi as she is in Tokyo.

The chief ground on which critics base their claim that Noriko represents 'traditional values' is the character's attitude to remarriage, in both *Late Spring* and *Tokyo Story*. Both instances strike me as, at most, ambiguous. In *Late Spring* her

objection seems to be specifically to men remarrying (she expresses no distaste or shock at the idea that Mrs. Miwa might be looking for a new husband): this is already somewhat eccentric, the traditional emphasis being on the impropriety of women remarrying. And her objection is expressed in so jarringly extreme a form (it is 'filthy' and 'unclean', according to the subtitles) that one is driven to look for a motive in personal psychology — which, given her desire to continue as the central figure in her father's household, is scarcely very difficult to find. In *Tokyo Story* Noriko at no point says or even hints that her motivation for not wanting to remarry (to put it more strongly: for wanting *not* to remarry) is allegiance to her dead husband. That is of course what the old couple assume to be the case (they adhere to 'residual' values, and he was after all their son), and Noriko fully understands this: hence her ashamed confession to her father-in-law that she doesn't think about his dead son *all* the time. Indeed, aside from the fact that she still keeps his photograph on display (it would be rather brutal to dump it in the garbage), there is no indication that she *ever* thinks of him, except when prompted. Her only memory of her marriage appears to be that (like his father before him!) Shoji went out drinking with his buddies almost every night, leaving her alone, and she often had to put him drunk to bed — which seems a pretty adequate motivation for resisting the pressures on her to fall into the same trap a second time. Whatever it is that Noriko can't help yearning for (and it is the yearning that definitively distinguishes her from a Shige), we can take it that it is not another husband.

As for Ozu the artist, it seems to me that, in both *Late Spring* and *Tokyo Story* his empathy is divided equally between Chishu Ryū and Setsuko Hara, the traditional patriarch (at his best) and the woman who, however tentatively, is trying to extricate herself from the entrapments and constrictions of patriarchy: in both films, their mutual affection and respect for each other is central to the emotional (the 'Mozartian') complexity of the total effect. In other words, in his rigorous and indefatigable search for positive values by which to live in a culture increasingly devoid of them, Ozu is drawn to both the residual and the emergent, and Noriko is as important to him as she obviously is because she enables him convincingly to harmonize the two.

*Tokyo Story* has been viewed much too narrowly as a film about an old couple with ungrateful children. Its scope is enormous, encompassing a searching social analysis of which Noriko gradually becomes the focal point, and to which the question of marriage is central. We are shown three marriages in the film: two Tokyo marriages, contained within the 'dominant', one Onomichi marriage, contained within the 'residual'. The Tokyo marriages are presented as at once representative and inverse mirror-images of each other. In that of the old couple's eldest son the man (Koichi, the doctor) is the dominant partner, the woman reduced to the status of housewife/mother, and there are two children; in that of the elder daughter the woman (Shige, the 'beautician') is dominant, the man nagged and submissive, and the marriage is childless. Both are of course indistinguishable from American models (and Shige's work might be defined as the Americanization of Japanese women), with dominance determined by the purely



material issue of 'Who makes the money'. These represent the chief models available to Noriko if she decided to remarry, though we are permitted a glimpse of one other (Noriko's neighbour, who keeps her baby under what looks like the kind of cover used to keep flies off cheese) and the memory of Noriko's own (Shoji's drunken nights, referred to earlier).

Set against this distinctly unencouraging portrayal of the potentialities of marriage within the 'dominant', it is hardly surprising that the Onomichi marriage of the old couple, Shukichi and Tomi Hirayama, acquires positive connotations, embodying the values of the 'residual' which modern Tokyo has obliterated. As with the other marriages in the film, the prime focus is on the position of the woman. (I don't mean by this that Tomi is a more 'important' character than Shukichi in the context of the whole film, simply that she is the focus in its depiction of the marriage, for the reason that, as a 'traditional' Japanese woman of the older generation, she exists only within the marriage, is defined only by that, as wife and mother, and has no further meaning). Joan Mellen offers a remarkable account of Tomi, seeing her as representing some kind of lost ideal (from Ozu's diehard feudal perspective, that is): 'The old lady, shrewd and perceptive, is a living example of all that is beautiful and becoming in the manner and behavior of the past. In her person, woman at her most splendid and feudal values at their apogee are conjoined'. (Though later we are told that '...she is not so much expressive of her sex, being far beyond the age of sexuality... The ideal woman' — Mellen's emphasis — 'is the widowed Noriko.' I thought the notion that women are defined strictly in terms of their sexuality was now regarded as a form of male chauvinism).

Ozu never sentimentalizes Tomi in that manner. True, he presents her with compassion and respect, wholly without condescension, because he understands her and her position so well: the attitude, once again, is dramatized in Noriko and communicated through her to the spectator. But what is stressed most obviously in the film, I would have thought, is Tomi's limitations: the limitations imposed on her by her upbringing and by the traditional expectations of womanhood. She moves through the film — once cut adrift from her native environment — in a kind of daze, afraid to think too much, afraid to be too aware, afraid to ask too many questions. Her life is lived in a state of self-delusion of which she is poignantly half-conscious: she clings, for example, to the belief that Shoji, 'missing in action' for eight years, is still alive somewhere, but if she really believed it she could scarcely urge Noriko to remarry. (David Bordwell tells us that Kogo Noda, though not Ozu at that time, had seen *Make Way for Tomorrow*, and one can see strong parallels between Tomi and McCarey's Lucy Cooper, with her perpetual hesitation between 'facing facts' and 'pretending there are no facts to face'). Shoji, of course, being safely dead, can linger on in memory as the one child who might not have disappointed her, a wish strong enough, apparently, to survive Noriko's account of their marriage. That marriage, in fact, echoes Tomi's: we learn that Hirayama, too, habitually went out drinking, leaving his wife to mind the kids and coming home drunk, behaviour we see reactivated in Tokyo, in his night out boozing with an old crony, showing that Tokyo *mores* and Onomichi *mores* are not totally discrete. After Tomi's death,

Shukichi is left wishing that he'd been 'kinder' to her. Noriko cannot possibly be seen as some kind of throwback to the values Tomi embodies, though an important relationship is established between them because of the human values they share: goodwill, emotional generosity, a capacity for caring. In all other ways, Noriko is presented in strong contrast to Tomi: she is in full possession of an awareness that the older woman can barely imagine and would never dare permit herself.

Of the three films, it is only in *Tokyo Story* that Noriko's resistance to (re-)marriage is successful. This does not of course leave her happy: in the postwar Tokyo that Ozu depicts there is no fulfilling role available to a woman, and Noriko could never return to the kind of uneasy, part-illusory, fragile fulfilment represented by Tomi. Yet, if the film moves inexorably to the famous formulation 'Isn't life disappointing?' (taken, far too often, as its 'message', as if Ozu were a delivery boy), it is important to see that it also moves beyond it. Indeed, it is out of the scene in which that formulation occurs — the sudden, unexpected but completely convincing development of intimacy between Noriko and the youngest child Kyoko — that the qualified, tentative note of hope (the crystallization of the 'emergent') on which the film ends, grows.

I suggested earlier that one of the keys to the film is touch. Touching is all but banished from the film, and at one point at least this absence acquires expressive force: when Tomi collapses on the sea-wall at Atami (the film's strongest foreshadowing of her death), her husband does not even move to help her to her feet — not, we understand, out of callousness or indifference, but from a refusal to confront the serious implications (Tomi is not the only one reluctant to 'face facts'). Unless I have missed something, there are only two instances of touch prior to the final sequences, and their function is to underline the contrast between Shige and Noriko: during the parents' first night in Tokyo, Shige aggressively pushes her two little nephews into the room; when Tomi spends the night in her apartment, Noriko gently and tenderly massages the old woman's aching back and later presses money into her hands.

In both these instances touch is functional — that is to say it has a purpose beyond itself. There is I think only one moment in the entire film of *autonomous* touch, as a spontaneous gesture of tenderness and affection: as they say goodbye, Noriko first clasps Kyoko's hand in hers, then reaches up lightly to stroke her hair, then clasps the hand again and holds it until Kyoko moves away to leave for her work. The gesture roughly coincides with Noriko's repetition of her invitation to Kyoko to visit her in Tokyo, and Kyoko's pleased acceptance. We cannot say confidently that the two women will ever meet again; on the other hand we cannot doubt their mutual sincerity.

Between this and Noriko's return to Tokyo comes the lengthy dialogue between her and Shukichi, in the course of which he gives her Tomi's watch, telling her that Tomi said she had never met a nicer woman. Noriko reacts with the embarrassment which is (in my experience) a typical, even obligatory, Japanese response to explicit praise, but the embarrassment is intensified by her assumption (doubtless



partly correct) that Tomi found her so 'nice' because she has remained faithful to her husband's memory. Hence her ashamed confession to Hirayama that sometimes she goes for days without thinking of Shoji. The rising emotion takes her quickly to breakdown and the expression of despair — that sometimes she feels she 'can't go on' — but she is unable to formulate any possible antidote: she yearns for something but she can't say what.

The gift of the watch may be taken as formulating for us what Noriko cannot yet define. As passed down from woman to woman (via a sensitive and sympathetic male) it carries a particular charge: we have seen so many movies in which a watch is passed from father to son, to symbolize continuity of the male line (for suggestive variations on this — but still within the syndrome of male inheritance — see the Christmas gift of the watch in *Night of the Hunter* and the watch without hands in *Wild Strawberries*). In *Tokyo Story* it serves as a link between three generations of women. Kyoko, in the classroom among her pupils (it is important that she is a teacher), looks at her watch, moves to the window overlooking the railway tracks, looks at the watch again, waits to see Noriko's train go by; Noriko, on the train, takes out Tomi's watch and looks at it, with an expression combining sorrow with a

muted pleasure. Hence Ozu establishes continuity between women across time and space, transcending death. One can read the sequence as, among other things, the redemption of Tomi's wasted life, given sudden posthumous meaning in the solidarity of women.

If one takes the term 'lesbian' in the more comprehensive sense legitimated by radical feminism — female bonding, for mutual support and strength within a male-dominated culture — then the term is perfectly appropriate here. Ozu could not of course define the precise nature of the 'emergent' to which these indications (arrived at no doubt intuitively, with the intuitive freedom of the great artist) point: it achieved definition only after his death, in the Women's Movement of the '60s and '70s.

#### A Note on *Equinox Flower*

I must confess to a certain arbitrariness in appropriating *Equinox Flower* as a kind of addendum to the trilogy. Setsukos and Hirayamas weave in and out of Ozu's work, so one cannot make too much of the names (on the other hand, a search of the available credits reveals only one Noriko outside the

*Equinox Flower*: the threatened patriarch





trilogy, in *The End of Summer*). It is also stretching things to relate Setsuko here to the Noriko of the trilogy: she is a far less potentially threatening and radical figure, and is far from reluctant to marry, her choice being based on that strong romantic attachment that, if Noriko ever experiences it for a man, she never reveals. Yet, like Noriko, Setsuko fights for her right to independence and personal autonomy, resisting the encroachments of tradition. In attaching *Equinox Flower* in this way I am doubtless motivated partly by my love for the film and a desire to write about it, however briefly: it has not received the recognition that it deserves. I claim here simply that it takes up and develops, beyond any other late Ozu film, the theme of female bonding. Indeed, it strikes me as his most overtly feminist film: one might without inappropriateness borrow a title from Mizoguchi (in his most radical period) and rename it *Victory of Women*.

Ozu's title has its own resonance and beauty (the season of change and the flowers that bloom out of change), and it refers us to a major aspect of the films I have hitherto deliberately underplayed: Ozu's evident involvement with, and qualified emotional commitment to, the figure of the Father, the Japanese patriarch. One might describe *Equinox Flower* as a feminist film made from the viewpoint of the traditional patriarch: the seeming paradox marks its particular richness and distinction.

There is no question that the patriarch is the film's central figure, still named Hirayama but no longer played by Chishu Ryu, whose fathers are in general more permissive and open to change than the staunchly traditionalist and authoritarian figure enacted by Shin Saburi. (Ryu here plays another father, whose daughter is living with her lover out of wedlock, one of the film's many ironies being that Saburi, the far more inflexible patriarch within his own family, is instrumental in persuading Ryu to accept the situation). The film is about his education at the hands of the women, and Ozu's complexity of response is nowhere more vividly exemplified than in his ability simultaneously to empathize with the patriarch's sense of loss and to celebrate the women's victory.

This time, Ozu makes his concern with marriage almost schematically explicit: never has a theme been more clearly announced in a film's opening moments. Its central tension is also established very early, in the sequence of the wedding banquet where Hirayama must make the chief speech. This marriage, he tells the assembly, with some discomfort, is a love match (the bride and groom actually chose each other), and of course that is a Good Thing, we're adjusting nowadays to these new-fangled notions. But his own marriage (he feels compelled to add) was a traditional 'arranged' marriage, and is a living testimony to the success of such arrangements. In the midst of this convoluted *mélange* of would-be liberal conservative self-defensiveness, we are shown his wife (the great Kinuyo Tanaka, familiar to us from so many late Mizoguchi movies, but in fact an Ozu 'regular' in a far earlier period), looking extremely dubious and not a little embarrassed. Ozu's pervasive awareness that 'arranged' marriages were always arranged at the expense of women is eloquently realized in her expression. Tanaka's performance throughout the film is extraordinary (and we should remember that Ozu never permitted a gesture or expression that he himself didn't

'mean'): a woman saved from the misery of a life of hatred and resentment purely by her innate good humour, too old-fashioned not to be subservient (to the letter rather than the spirit), and too aware not to view her own situation (and her lord-and-master) with quiet irony; losing the little battles (whether or not she is allowed to listen to 'pop' music on the radio) while she gently and surreptitiously wins the war.

The film's main plot, thematically adumbrated here with masterly economy, concerns the daughter Setsuko's fixed and irreversible decision to marry 'for love', and the father's obstinate recalcitrance in accepting her right to do so. But Ozu is far too intelligent to fall into the sentimental 'modern is better' trap: the film denies us any guarantee whatever that the 'love' marriages of the present will be any more successful than the 'arranged' marriages of the past. That is not the issue. What is the issue is whether or not women have the right to make (for better or worse) their own decisions, and here the film is entirely unambiguous.

The power of female bonding has never (as far as I am aware) been carried so far in any previous Ozu movie, and it will never be carried as far in the five subsequent ones. (I should say here, parenthetically, that I agree — tentatively, I am open to conversion — with Noël Burch, though for quite different reasons, that Ozu finally declined into academicism. Only I set the date much later: the last colour films strike me as tired, the impetus gone, a retreat into a formalist play with colour that, at its worst, becomes almost a kind of painting-by-numbers. That the feminist thrust of *Equinox Flower* is not followed through seems to me infinitely more significant than any failure to mismatch eyelines. A parallel case in the West might be Hawks's retreat from the radical narrative experimentation of *Red Line 7000*: with both directors the retreat took the form of remaking earlier successes). Ozu presents us with a veritable conspiracy of women to induce Hirayama to accept his daughter's right to decide her own destiny — to accept the marriage chosen by her and not himself.

I shall not attempt to trace here the complicated process by which this is brought about: suffice it to say that every episode in the film is relevant to it. I want simply to isolate two moments that seem to me to epitomize the Ozu-esque complexity.

1. The whole film moves towards Setsuko's wedding, yet (typically, of Ozu) we are denied the satisfaction of the ceremony (which her father refuses to attend). In its place we have another ceremony: Hirayama's participation in an all-male 'Old Boys' Reunion' in celebration of the Emperor's birthday, replete with patriotic recitations and songs. Ozu enters into this wholeheartedly, at the same time foregrounding its nostalgia, the irrevocable pastness of what is being commemorated. The patriotic poem recited (and by Chishu Ryu, no less) is about failure and defeat.

2. In this, his first colour film, Ozu indulges to the limit his fondness for red: composition after composition is centred (or significantly de-centred) on bright red objects. Yet repeatedly, throughout, we are shown a red chair, out in the corridor where the telephone is located, in which nobody ever sits. The film's climax comes when Mrs. Hirayama, over the telephone, finally extracts from her husband (as the last move in all the pressures the women have exerted upon him) the promise to





*Late Autumn: Setsuko Hara (left), post-Noriko*

visit Setsuko and her husband. She replaces the receiver, and goes and sits, triumphant, in the red chair. It is so typical and beautiful of Ozu that so tiny and apparently trivial a gesture should signify so much: the 'victory of women' could not be more appropriately celebrated.

The film ends with Hirayama, on the train en route to visit Setsuko and her chosen husband, humming to himself the patriotic song of defeat, and smiling contentedly.

*This article is dedicated to Yuichi Takahashi, whom I shall describe once again, despite his contortions of agonized embarrassment, as one of the most wholly admirable human beings I have ever met.*

*I wish to thank, again, the Ontario Arts Council for their most generous financial support.*



# Kings Row

by Michael Walker

A small-town melodrama which mounts a devastating critique of its subject, *Kings Row* was remarkably ahead of its time. It was not until the '50s that the small-town melodrama, through the films of such major directors as King Vidor (*Ruby Gentry*, 1952), Douglas Sirk (*All I Desire*, 1953; *All That Heaven Allows*, 1955) and Vincente Minnelli (*Some Came Running*, 1959; *Home from the Hill*, 1960) developed an equivalent critical perspective, and in some respects *Kings Row* still seems a more subversive work than any of these. But, although many critics have indicated a liking for the film, none, to the best of my knowledge, has set out to demonstrate in detail its exceptional qualities. On the fiftieth anniversary of its first review in *The Motion Picture Herald* (December 1941), this is a long overdue attempt to give the film its due.

After the rigorous enforcement of the Production Code in 1934, Hollywood films which sought to criticise in any fundamental sense 'the American way of life' became officially impossible to make. They could be critical of certain aspects of society — as in the social problem film — but they could not subvert the great American institutions: marriage, the family, capitalism, the state, the law etc. And, although the small town was not exactly an institution, it was in an important sense a hallowed image of America, embodying certain myths and ideals. And so, again, whilst criticism could be made of certain features of the small town — both *Fury* (Fritz Lang, 1936) and *They Won't Forget* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1937) contain savage indictments of small-town mob violence — a film which proceeded to depict the society as deeply corrupted over a long period of time was almost inconceivable. *Kings Row* is such a film.







When Casey Robinson, the film's script-writer, first read Harry Bellaman's 1941 novel, he considered it unfilmable. The major problem is that it contains father-daughter incest between Dr. Tower and Cassie. However, he saw a solution in 'translating the incest into an inherited tendency towards insanity'. After the script was finished, he and Hal Wallis, the producer, still had to convince the Production Code official — Geoffrey Shurlock, subsequently Head of the Code Office, replacing Joseph Breen — that the novel had been suitably laundered and that all 'wrong-doers' were now suitably punished or penitent. Robinson recalls that the arguments went on all day before agreement was reached. How certain incidents and lines got through that process is however still a mystery: think of Cassie's extraordinary outburst: 'I hate it — I hate everything — I'd hate God if I could, but there's nothing you can reach!'

Only when the script was finished was Sam Wood brought in as director. And, as James Wong Howe has pointed out<sup>2</sup>, all the shots in the film were story-boarded in advance by William Cameron Menzies in his capacity as production designer, a function he performed for Wood on a number of films of the time, beginning with *Our Town* (1940). With Menzies looking after the visual design of the movie and Wong Howe, a master cinematographer, looking after the lighting, Wood was essentially responsible for directing the actors. And he made an excellent job of it: Ronald Reagan gives what is surely the performance of his Hollywood career. Finally, Erich Wolfgang Korngold composed an outstanding musical score for the film, a major contribution to its success. Without doubt, *Kings Row* is an example of Hollywood teamwork at its very best; a remarkable synthesis of inspired contributions.

As a small-town melodrama, *Kings Row* deals with a whole spectrum of themes, motifs and dramatic situations of the sub-genre. The film's power and intensity have been generally acknowledged, but it is its thematic density which is most extraordinary. Because of this density, it is convenient to analyse the movie under a series of sub-headings.

### The prologue

The film begins in 1890. In the thirteen minute prologue, during which the five central characters of the younger generation are still school children, many of the later concerns and developments are anticipated. Firstly, the prologue is a model of narrative exposition. Virtually all the main characters are introduced, together with a number of vital structural oppositions: the social contrast between Dr. Tower and Dr. Gordon (shown in the attendance at the parties of each of their daughters, Cassie and Louise); the class distinctions between suburbia (Parris Mitchell and Cassie), uptown (Drake McHugh and Louise), and downtown (Randy Monaghan and Willie Mackintosh), with Cassie and Randy, who never meet in the film, at the two extremes. That Parris and Drake (Willie Mackintosh is dropped as a character after the prologue) move freely through the different zones of the town whilst the girls are far more restricted introduces a motif that will be significantly developed later in the film. For example, Randy

### KINGS ROW

Warner Brothers 1942, 127 minutes

Producer: Hal B Wallis; Director: Sam Wood;

Associate Producer: David Lewis;

Screenplay: Casey Robinson, based on the novel by Henry Bellaman; Photography: James Wong Howe;

Music: Erich Wolfgang Korngold;

Production design: William Cameron Menzies;

Art director: Carl Jules Weyl; Editor: Ralph Dawson;

### CAST

Ann Sheridan (Randy Monaghan)  
Robert Cummings (Parris Mitchell)  
Ronald Reagan (Drake McHugh)  
Betty Field (Cassandra Tower)  
Charles Coburn (Dr. Henry Gordon)  
Claude Rains (Dr. Alexander Tower)  
Judith Anderson (Mrs. Gordon)  
Nancy Coleman (Louise Gordon)  
Kaaren Verne (Elise Sandor)  
Marie Ouspenskaya (Madame von Eln)  
Harry Davenport (Colonel Skeffington)  
Ernest Cossart (Mr. Monaghan)  
Pat Moriarty (Tod Monaghan)  
Ilka Gruning (Anna, the maid)  
Minor Watson (Sam Winters)  
Ludwig Stossel (Dr. Berdorff)  
Erwin Kalser (Mr. Sandor)  
Egon Brecher (Dr. Candell)  
Scotty Beckett (Parris as a boy)  
Douglas Croft (Drake as a boy)  
Mary Thomas (Cassie as a girl)  
Ann Todd (Randy as a girl)  
Julie Warren (Poppy Ross)  
Mary Scott (Jinny Ross)

has to wait for Drake to return to her part of the town (as in the prologue, he is in effect coming from Louise) before their relationship as adults begins.

Above all, the prologue contains highly significant pre-echoes of later events. Dr. Gordon's operation without anaesthetic on the legs of Mr. Mackintosh anticipates his amputation of Drake's legs. Not only does Parris and Cassie's illicit bathing anticipate their illicit sex, but we are forewarned of Dr. Tower's puritanical repressiveness in Cassie's statement that he would 'take the switch' to her if he knew about the bathing. Later, he kills her when he finds out about her sexual relationship with Parris. (In fact, he kills her when he discovers that she's pregnant, although this is only revealed through veiled hints.) Similarly, Mrs. Tower's being shut away upstairs in the house anticipates Cassie's future, which is already foreshadowed at the end of the prologue, when Cassie waits at the stile to tell Parris that her father has just told her that she will no longer be attending school. Indeed, the setting and ending of this scene — which we later learn

1. Casey Robinson interviewed by Joel Greenberg; *Focus on Film* 32, 1979.
2. James Wong Howe interview in Charles Higham: *Hollywood Cameramen* (Thames & Hudson, 1970), p 88.



was Parris and Cassie's final meeting as children — will be repeated in their penultimate scene together as adults, when Cassie flees from Parris and, in close-up, he calls in vain after her.

There are also more subtle pre-echoes. The difference in tone of the two main heterosexual relationships is already present in the contrast between the secretiveness of Parris and Cassie's illicit bathing as against the fun of Drake and Randy's swinging on the rings in Elroy's Ice House. (Parris is with Drake in the ice house, but he isn't comfortable swinging on the rings. Randy points out that his pants are too tight and suggests that he takes them off. He declines — 'Nothing on under them' — which clearly suggests that he has been decidedly forward in taking them off to go swimming with Cassie.) In addition, throughout the prologue, an opposition is established between the children outdoors and the adults indoors. Only Parris is shown indoors and, when he first arrives home, the film visualises the opposition: with the camera inside the house, he is shown moving round the outside, greeting Madame von Eln, his grandmother (in French!) from a succession of windows. Both children's parties are held out of doors. Implicitly, the houses are the domain of the adults, and

the children are repeatedly shown as having significant problems with the power they wield in them. This is crystallised in a motif which echoes through the film: the children making or attempting to make uninvited and/or wild incursions into the house — almost always, in defiance of adult authority. The motif occurs twice in the prologue: Dr. Tower firmly blocking Parris's attempt to go upstairs and say goodbye to Mrs. Tower, and Willie Mackintosh hysterically throwing himself against the locked door of his own home when he hears his father screaming in pain at Dr. Gordon's 'operation'. Before discussing the motif, however, it is necessary to establish the significance of the film's representation of the two doctors.

### The doctors

The two blocked incursions relate to another significant linkage established in the prologue: the adults who provoke the incursions, Mrs. Tower and Dr. Gordon, are first glimpsed at upstairs windows. This connects the two doctors as 'agents of repression' within the town: Mrs. Tower has been shut away upstairs by Dr. Tower; Dr. Gordon closes the window

Randy and Drake







Elsie, her father and Parris

preparatory to his sadistic operation: we learn later that the lack of anaesthetic caused Mr. Mackintosh to die of shock. The contrast between the doctors socially thus becomes much less significant than the similarities between them morally. Each is ultimately revealed as a monster, and in each case this is expressed through the doctor's relationship with his daughter.

Dr. Gordon is unambiguously a monster. As Louise says to Parris 'He thought it was his duty to punish wickedness'. Apart from Mr. Mackintosh, about whom we know only that he lives, like the Monaghans, down by the railroad tracks, Gordon's major victim in the movie is Drake. And there is no question that he amputates Drake's legs (which is as close to castration as one could imagine in a Hollywood movie) as revenge for Drake's earlier relationship with Louise, even though all the evidence points to Drake not having had sex with her. But Drake's stepping in to protect Parris after Dr. Tower has killed Cassie — Drake claims that it was he who was dating Cassie — occurs immediately after Dr. Gordon has discovered that Cassie was pregnant ('There's something about the girl'): Gordon thus considers he has evidence of

Drake's promiscuity. (Hence the significance of Gordon's malignant look which follows Drake as he walks away from the house.) In the scene when Louise watches Drake and Randy drive by her house, Mrs. Gordon makes reference to her husband's conclusions: 'Your father is a doctor, and if you know what I know... When a boy runs around with a girl like that...' Louise interrupts her: 'I wish it was me!' This suggests strongly that Louise is still a virgin, and the film's audacity in allowing her to wish it were otherwise is registered in Mrs. Gordon's appalled reaction.

When Drake has his accident and her father is summoned to the depot, Louise follows him down there. We see her when she returns home: she knows what her father has done and why. In a father/daughter confrontation of extraordinary virulence, she accuses him of being a monster and he strikes her to the floor. She then says she'll expose him: 'I know all about you and your operations'. But his power as a doctor is too great. He calls her accusations insane, and says that, if she

3. Robin Wood: *Return of the Repressed: Film Comment* July/August 1978.

4. Leslie Fiedler: *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Paladin, 1970), especially chapter 12.



utters one more word about them, he'll have her committed. Like Cassie before her, Louise, too, is then shut away.

The evil doctor did of course occur in American films prior to *Kings Row*; in the horror movie. But, as Robin Wood has pointed out, horror throughout the '30s was located firmly outside America, in Europe or on remote islands.<sup>3</sup> *Kings Row* marks the entry of the evil doctor into the American small town. The point is underlined by the film's horror movie overtones: Dr. Tower's Gothic house, with its shadowy, low key interiors; Dr. Gordon's sadistic operations. There is also a more suggestive reference to the horror movie. Parris does not hear about Louise's accusations against her father until late in the film, when he returns to Kings Row from Vienna, where he has been studying psychiatry. Despite his own earlier misgivings about Gordon — who has since died — Louise's claim is so shattering that he turns to Colonel Skeffington, a lawyer and the town's only non-malevolent figure of patriarchal authority, and asks him if her accusations could be true. The latter agrees that they could be — 'sadistic surgeons are not unknown in medical history' — and adds 'You wouldn't be shocked if you heard of it happening in some remote town in Europe': the Frankenstein connection.

Dr. Tower is a more complex character than Dr. Gordon: he performs the good function of educating Parris as well as the evil one of killing his daughter. But why does he kill Cassie? When Casey Robinson came to adapt the novel, this was his big problem. In the novel, when Parris reads Tower's diary after the two deaths (having killed Cassie, Tower committed suicide), he deduces from it that Tower was having an incestuous relationship with Cassie, that he had killed his wife to get her out of the way and that he killed Cassie when she threatened to leave him to go off with Parris. To account for this, the novel has to make Tower into a madman. Nevertheless, in bringing incest into the story, Bellaman is rather self-consciously incorporating what Leslie Fiedler has called the major underground concern of the American gothic tradition.<sup>4</sup> In other words, just as the movie makes use of the horror genre to suggest a dark underside to the small town, so Bellaman in the novel is utilizing the deepest horror of the American gothic genre — the fear and attraction of incest, exemplified above all in Poe — to feed into his story. In fact, it is brother-sister incest that Fiedler describes in such terms, and Bellaman could not go quite that far. However, such an idea was surely at the back of his mind: the names Parris and Cassandra cannot be 'innocent' and, in the story of Troy, Paris and Cassandra were brother and sister.

Robinson's solution to the problem is extremely neat. He has preserved the same sequence of events as the novel with regard to the Parris-Cassie-Dr. Tower story, but provided a different answer for Parris in the diary: dementia praecox, the old-fashioned name for schizophrenia. Mrs. Tower had it, Cassie inherited it from her and so Parris's conclusion is that Tower killed Cassie to protect him, Parris, to prevent him from being saddled with the burden of an insane wife. One would be right, I think, in being suspicious of such an interpretation. First, because the events leading up to the deaths are the same as in the novel, it all becomes a question of interpretation. Tower doesn't leave a suicide note as such, he leaves, unlocked, a hitherto locked 'diary' which has 'Parris

Mitchell' on the cover, a clear signal to Parris to read it. Parris is thus drawing conclusions from Tower's own account, which could indeed have been prepared for him (the long time gap between his killing Cassie and his committing suicide is pointedly mentioned). Second, Robinson has added Cassie's pregnancy, which is not in the novel. And so Tower kills her when the fact of her pregnancy is realised: an act which smacks of the revenge of a jealous lover rather more than that of a punitive father. Third, we see no hard evidence that Cassie is suffering from any kind of mental illness. And, even if she did show such signs, these could well have been induced by her confinement. On a modern reading, as Andrew Britton has pointed out to me, any symptoms of schizophrenia Cassie did show could be attributed — within the perspective established by R.D. Laing<sup>5</sup> — to her threatening, claustrophobic family situation. And so, not only are the traces of the incest motive not expunged from the film, but Tower is implicitly indicted on the count of being the likely cause of whatever symptoms Cassie may have shown. Fourth, since Parris in the novel only realises in retrospect that Tower was insane, and since the man's actions and characterisation are essentially the same in the film, such a reading is at least available for the film. His conviction that his wife and Cassie were schizophrenic would then be a reflection of his own insanity. Given the parallels the film develops between the doctors in shutting their daughters away, and given that we *know* Louise is sane, doubts are clearly thrown on Tower's motives. Finally, whatever reasons Tower may have had, killing Cassie makes him into a monster.

Both doctors presume to play God: to decide the fates of other people, even to the extent of who should live and who should die. But the film goes even further: when Parris returns to Kings Row as the new doctor, he *almost* behaves in the same way. He is summoned by Mrs. Gordon to see Louise: terrified of what Louise threatens to make public about Dr. Gordon, Mrs. Gordon wants Parris to silence her. But, just as she wants to protect the memory of Gordon, so Parris wants to protect Drake: he's convinced that Drake is better off in ignorance about Gordon's sadistic revenge. And so, Parris actually contemplates doing what Dr. Gordon threatened and Mrs. Gordon wants: have Louise committed, even though he, too, knows she isn't ill. The film goes right to the edge of completely subverting its hero, of making him, too, into a monster.

That the two doctors should be the film's villains is remarkable. The doctor in small-town melodramas is traditionally a highly respected member of the bourgeois community, often, indeed, a moral authority to whom the hero or heroine will turn for advice. In the '50s melodramas mentioned earlier, the doctor — who occurs in almost all of them — is precisely such a figure. In other words, in this respect *Kings Row* is a decisively more subversive work than its more lauded successors.

The evil dominance of the two doctors is further expressed by their powers to suppress dissent. Sam Winters, the sheriff, was present when Gordon operated on Drake, and we learn afterwards that he was fully aware that the legs weren't bro-

5. R.D. Laing: *The Divided Self* (Pelican, 1965).



ken, but he nevertheless kept silent. Even more damning, ideologically speaking, is the way Colonel Skeffington is implicated. Until Gordon's death, Skeffington is only ever seen in his company, and so we naturally assume that the two men are friends. Thus it hardly seems likely that Skeffington could have remained in total ignorance of Gordon's predilection for sadistic operations. We note that Parris had suspected him some time ago — as is shown when he asks Tower if Gordon can be trusted — and Skeffington himself is not surprised when Parris asks him about Louise's accusations. But this raises the highly damaging question: what was this figure of patriarchal authority doing all those years whilst his friend went around killing and maiming people?

As is indicated by the two linked moments in the prologue, the doctors exercise a particular control over 'the upstairs'. The confinement to bedrooms of both Drake and Louise in the later stages of the movie is a direct consequence of Gordon's butchery of Drake, and it is a further measure of Gordon's power that, even after his death, they both remain confined. In *Kings Row*, the bedrooms upstairs are associated with imprisonment, pain, dying, 'castration' and the threat of losing one's mind and, with the exception of Madame von Eln's dying, these associations arise directly from the doctors' activities. In other words, they do not simply suppress sexuality, but turn the bedroom into a site of agony.

In the film's opening shot, *Kings Row* is introduced through the town sign, which reads 'A good town - A good clean town - A good town to live in - and a good place to raise your children'. Once one has seen the film, the irony of this is obvious. One of the most remarkable features of the film as a small-town melodrama is the almost total absence of religion: five significant characters die, but we see no funerals and, in particular, we see no church or priest throughout the movie. The only positive reference to religion is Randy's 'Mary, blessed mother of God', repeated three times when Parris returns from Vienna to see Drake, but it is more than matched by Cassie's hysterical outburst against an inaccessible God. Implicitly, *Kings Row* seems like a town in the grip of the Devil, controlled, until the last few scenes, by two monstrous doctors, whose very ability to 'play God' is a measure not just of their evil, but also of a society which frequently seems helplessly in their power.

### Melodrama of triumph: the children

In *Melodrama and the American Cinema*<sup>6</sup>, I suggest a number of theoretical approaches to film melodrama, using as a starting point Robert B. Heilman's theories about theatrical melodrama, in which he distinguishes between the three fundamental dramatic modes of tragedy, melodrama and comedy.<sup>7</sup> Briefly, he distinguishes melodrama from tragedy in terms of 'dividedness': in melodrama the world is divided (into good and evil, weak and strong, oppressed and oppressors), whilst man is 'whole'; in tragedy, man is divided, torn between conflicting values and desires. And so, in melodrama the forces with which the hero must grapple are external - oppression, corruption etc; whereas in tragedy the forces are internal. He then distinguishes melodrama from comedy in terms of

'acceptance': the melodramatic mode is one of protest, resistance, challenge etc; whereas the comic mode is one of 'acceptance': accommodation, compromise, 'a coming to terms with "the ways of the world"'. A useful development of Heilman's model may be found in James Smith's monograph on melodrama, in which he divides melodrama into three sub-categories: melodramas of triumph, defeat and protest.<sup>8</sup>

With its polarisation of good and evil, and its constant sense of a world in which the young people have to struggle against oppression etc, *Kings Row* is a classic example of melodrama on the Heilman model. What Heilman refers to as the 'monopathic' state of characters in melodrama manifests itself above all in the impulsiveness of the young people: the tendency to react 'blindly' to events, lacking a sense of self-awareness. But it is often the case that the finest melodramas can, nevertheless, articulate a 'tragic' perspective through the very blindness of the characters. This occurs in *Kings Row* in the way that Drake, seeking to protect Parris's reputation, steps in to claim that he was Cassie's boyfriend. Parris is 'blind' in that it never occurs to him that Cassie could have been pregnant: a rather serious failure of perception for a future doctor. Drake is 'blind' in a generous sense, thinking only to protect Parris, and without concern for his own reputation. But, as noted, his claim leads to Dr. Gordon considering that he has hard evidence of Drake's promiscuity, which results in Drake's losing his legs. Neither of the young men grasps the connection; in particular, Parris never realises that it was Drake's generosity on his account that prompted Gordon's revenge.

Nevertheless, despite the grip of the malevolent doctors over the lives of the young people, *Kings Row* is above all a melodrama of triumph. In fact, it becomes almost risibly so at the end. Having decided to tell Drake the truth, Parris then keeps Drake, Randy and the audience absurdly in suspense by quoting two verses of Henley's *Invictus* before getting to the point. Drake's reaction to the revelation that the amputation of his legs was unnecessary is much better handled - a mixture of relief, anger, defiance and liberation - but the film cannot stop there and, whilst Korngold goes over the top with the sudden introduction of a choir, Parris is last seen running like mad across a field we've never seen before to embrace Elise, his substitute love.

Here the melodrama becomes so hyperbolic it verges on the parodic. But the film is frequently in danger of this; not only does it have the typically dynamic thrust of a Warners' movie, but its dramatic mode is 'melodramatic', full of extremes of emotion. Many scenes risk seeming risible: Drake's 'Where's the rest of me?' is a particularly notorious example. Although I still feel that the scene - when Drake wakes to discover that his legs have been amputated - conveys a genuine sense of terror, it is very difficult to block out the extra-cinematic associations: Reagan even used the line as the title of his 1965 autobiography.

6. Michael Walker: *Melodrama and the American Cinema: Movie 29/30*, Summer, 1982.

7. Robert B. Heilman: *Tragedy and Melodrama* (1968); *The Iceman, the Arsonist and the Troubled Agent* (1973); *The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society* (1973) - all University of Washington Press.

8. James Smith: *Melodrama* (Methuen, 1973): No. 28 in the 'Critical Idiom' series.



As a melodrama of triumph, *Kings Row* dramatises the struggle of the young people to conquer obstacles, to break free from oppression, to live out their lives passionately and intensely. But when, as with Cassie and Louise, the restrictions prove too strong, their anger and frustration is translated into some extraordinary outbursts and scenes of hysteria. Here, too, the film registers 'melodramatic excess'. Louise's two scenes of confrontation with her parents have already been mentioned; Cassie's last scenes with Parris are even more extreme. In the scene by the pond, she finds herself unable to tell him what she intended and abruptly substitutes the news that his grandmother is dying; then, when Parris starts to cry, she becomes more and more distraught, and ends with her frenzied outburst of hatred against everything. Their last scene together occurs in Drake's house, where Parris is staying after the death of his grandmother. Cassie arrives at the door in an extremely agitated state and begs Parris to take her with him to Europe. She is unable to explain why she has changed her mind - earlier, when he had proposed that they marry on his return from Europe, she had

recoiled from the thought - and, when he hesitates, she flees from the house as abruptly as she arrived.

The melodramatic heightening here and elsewhere in the film may be related to Peter Brooks' theories. Brooks argues that the heightened rhetoric of melodrama breaks through the 'reality principle' to express basic desires and primal states of being. It is like the dream world in its directness, its plenitude of expression, its untrammelled emotional utterances.<sup>9</sup> In Louise's case, she is confronting a father who is monstrous, and the power of the confrontation is an expression of the horror of her predicament. But Cassie's case is more complicated; here the reasons for her hysteria are never made clear. Nevertheless we can make sense of it as a reflection of her impossible wish to express the inexpressible: the inner torment of her condition. We can explore this further by considering what would seem to lie behind her hysteria in these last scenes.

9. Peter Brooks: *The Melodramatic Imagination* (Yale University, 1976), especially pp 40 - 42.

#### Parris and Cassie





In both scenes it seems reasonable to assume that she is torn between her love for Parris, and hence her wish not to hurt him, and her terror of her father. With this in mind, I would interpret her hysteria in the first scene as arising from her inability to tell Parris about her 'secret', which could be either her father's diagnosis of schizophrenia or something more sinister. That she is aware of a blockage between herself and Parris is registered clearly in the farewell at the stile, when she recoils from his proposal. And so, her outburst by the pond seems like an example of displacement: it is her father she really wants to hate, but - unlike Louise - she cannot, and so she displaces her hatred outwards. Her distress in the final scene - and her desperate wish to escape Kings Row with Parris - would then logically stem from her discovery that she's pregnant, which her father, in his omniscient way (as in his knowing about Madame von Eln's cancer), also knows about. Hence Cassie is terrified of what he might do, a terror which is perfectly justified since he kills her later that night.

Cassie's hysterical entrance into Drake's house is also one of the instances of the motif, introduced in the prologue, of the young people making wild/ uninvited/ unexpected incursions into houses. Further to the two instances in the prologue, examples are (3) Drake and Parris with Louise at the Gordons, resulting in a confrontation with her parents as soon as the latter arrive home, (4) Parris surprising Cassie in her father's study during a storm, (5) Parris throwing stones at Drake's window later that night to ask if he can stay the night, (6) Cassie's hysterical incursion into Drake's house to see Parris, (7) Drake turning up at the Towers' after the murder and suicide and claiming that he was Cassie's boyfriend, (8) Drake bursting into the Monaghans' to speak to Randy's father about taking Randy 'buggy-riding', (9) Louise bursting into the Monaghans' in an attempt to reach Drake and tell him that the amputation of his legs was unnecessary and (10) Parris bursting into Drake's bedroom at the end to spout poetry and, eventually, deliver Louise's message.

The separate incursions can be analysed in different ways. Three of them (Nos. 3, 4 & 8) concern one of the young men appropriating, or attempting to appropriate, a daughter from her father. But, whereas Drake confronts the father - first Dr. Gordon; then Mr. Monaghan - Parris does not, although his usurping of paternal authority is shown clearly enough in the location of the ensuing passionate love scene in Tower's study. Nevertheless, in No. 7 Drake is in effect confronting patriarchal authority - the full complement of Colonel Skeffington, Dr. Gordon and Sam Winters - on behalf of Parris, a substitution which has devastating consequences. The hysterical incursions of Cassie (No. 6) and Louise (No. 9) may also be connected. Each young woman is driven by a fear/hatred of her father, but she cannot speak about this: Cassie because she's too frightened, and Louise because she's prevented from doing so.

In general, the 'dramatic incursions' represent attempts by the young people to break through the barriers erected by the older generation: social, sexual and psychological. Randy's exclusion from the motif suggests that she is the most settled



and least troubled of the younger generation. However, she is involved in a separate thread here, a thread which connects with the remaining adult incursions, both of which concern Parris entering Drake's bedroom (Nos. 5 and 10). In order to discuss this, it is necessary to look at the film's gay subtext.

Drake's (many) relationships with the young women of the town are all either trivial (the Ross sisters) or frustrated (Louise) until Parris leaves Kings Row: then, immediately, he begins to date Randy who, moreover, is coded as a tomboy. The homoerotic implications of this are undeniable, and they occur in a number of other details: Parris going from his first sexual experience with Cassie to 'bunk with' Drake (these two scenes - which begin with incursion nos. 4 & 5 - are also linked in the way Parris signals his presence to the person in the house via a window); the phrasing of his letter from Vienna to Drake, in which he wishes for 'the sight of your face, the sound of your laugh'; the way that, once the full realisation of the loss of his legs hits Drake, it is Parris he cries for. And their reunion is extraordinarily like a lovers' reunion, even to the extent of Randy leaving the room (and blessing Mary!) Furthermore, on a psychoanalytical reading, the film is surely saying that involvement with women results in castration, the psychic damage of which can only be healed through male understanding rather than female sympathy.

Randy's place in this is, accordingly, problematic. Although she does not make a dramatic incursion into a



house, she is nevertheless involved in each of the three highly dramatic entrances into Drake's bedroom in her own house. In the first, she is summoned to confirm the horror of the castration: 'Where's the rest of me?' The second is Drake and Parris' reunion, in which she brings Parris into the bedroom, but then is displaced from the room by the intensity of the scene between the two men. Drake is so ashamed of his physical state that he averts his eyes, but Parris nevertheless continues to insist on his love, pressing his cheek next to his friend's. The third entrance is doubly significant. It is also the final instance of a dramatic incursion into a house and, as Parris arrives in the bedroom, Randy tries to stop him, thereby acting in the place of the doctors (Tower, Gordon, Parris himself, who stops Louise) who had hitherto blocked access to the bedroom in crucial earlier instances. But, if it looks as if Parris and Randy are struggling over Drake, it is in fact a struggle over what is best for Drake, and Randy submits to Parris's greater authority. Parris announces that he has not come as Drake's friend, but as his doctor. And, in telling Drake that the amputation of his legs was Gordon's revenge for Drake's dating Louise, Parris brings into the open the import of the psychoanalytical subtext. However, in a great moment of Oedipal defiance, Drake refuses to be broken by his castration: 'Where did Gordon think I lived - in my legs?' The ending thus liberates him: with Drake no longer ashamed of his body, he and Randy will be able to go without shame into the outside world. Moreover, by insisting here that he is acting as Drake's doctor, Parris also re-articulates his own relationship with Drake: Randy and Drake are brought together, rather than separated. Although one feels strongly that the intensity of the relationship between the two men is in no sense diminished - Parris's joy at Drake's 'resurrection' is clearly that of a friend - it is now able to co-exist with Drake and Randy's marriage.

In its insistence on intense love between men, the film is remarkably progressive. Steve Neale has suggested that, in melodrama, 'the narrative process is inaugurated by the eruption of (hetero)sexual desire into an already established social order'.<sup>10</sup> But in *Kings Row*, heterosexual desire erupts only to be virulently repressed, whereas the love between Drake and Parris seems unbounded, and produces two of the film's great moments of ecstasy: the reunion and Drake's tremendous burst of liberation at the end. However, Drake is not the only recipient of Parris's amazing capacity for love: consider the way he lifts up his grandmother like a lover, carries her across the bedroom and declares that he's crazy about her. This emotionalisation of the hero is extremely unusual in a Hollywood movie, even a melodrama. Intelligent, cultured (piano-

playing), sensitive (cries), Parris represents the sort of effete Europeanised male who is traditionally displaced by the tough, no nonsense, potent American male. Here, too, the film goes against expectations, as is discussed below.

In particular, Parris's capacity for loving means that the film can provide him with a substitute love, Elise, to whom he is able to attach the same sort of feeling as he had for Cassie. Nevertheless, the way in which Elise is 'conjured up' like the ghost of Cassie is so outrageous that it could possibly be unique in the Hollywood cinema. Parris has just spoken to Colonel Skeffington about his fear of 'meeting ghosts'; then, as he returns to the stile, he suddenly sees a young woman, dressed (like Cassie) in a flowing white dress, down by the pond. For a moment, he thinks she is Cassie. The sense of her as a projection of his desires is overwhelming; a sense reinforced by the way that she and her father come from Vienna and now live in Parris's old house. To Colonel Skeffington, Parris was unable to describe Kings Row as 'home' - it became 'the place I grew up in'. Now, as he re-enters his old house, he says 'It's like coming home'.

### Parents and parent figures

A further instance of the film's ideological audacity lies in its attitude to social class and national background. The latter enters into the equation because of the film's highly unusual stress on the European connection: first, in Parris's background, then in Elise's. The variables may be laid out as a grid:

What is most remarkable about the film's representations here is who falls on which side of the film's good/ bad moral

GIRLS	PARENTS	COUNTRY & CLASS
Cassie Tower (dies)	father: bad (dies) mother: 'mad' (dies)	American/ middle
Louise Gordon	father: bad (dies) mother: bad, but weak	American/ middle
Randy Monaghan	father: good (+ brother: good, but weak)	Irish-American/ working
Elise Sandor	father: good	European/ middle
BOYS	PARENT-FIGURES	COUNTRY & CLASS
Parris Mitchell	grandmother: good (dies)	European-American/ middle
Drake McHugh	Aunt Mamie: unknown* (dies)	American/ middle

\* Apart from her yell to Drake during the prologue, the only reference to the unseen Aunt Mamie is from Mrs. Gordon: 'It's a mercy your Aunt Mamie isn't alive to see you these days'. This suggests that Aunt Mamie probably belongs to the repressive American middle-class group.

10. Steve Neale: *Genre* (BFI, 1980), p. 22.





spectrum: the middle-class American parents (the Towers and the Gordons) are 'bad', whilst the working-class American parent (Mr. Monaghan) and the parents or parent-figures with a European connection (Parris's grandmother and Elise's father) are 'good'. Thus the film is surprisingly subversive: the American middle-class fathers are sadists and murderers, whilst all the positive values are invested in the working class and in European immigrants who have kept their old-world sensibilities and culture. The equation implicit in Colonel Skeffington's reference to what has been known to happen in 'some remote town in Europe' is completely reversed.

The European - predominantly Austrian - connection is particularly stressed: not only do Elise and her father come from Vienna but she, like Parris, is musical; thus Europe supplies both art (music) and science (psychoanalysis). (Their shared music teacher is also Germanic.) The casting of Maria Ouspenskaya as Madame von Eln means that the character's nationality is somewhat indeterminate, but I think - as in the novel - she's supposed to be French (her husband was German). But there is no question that the film approves of her powerful cultural influence over Parris. At the end of the scene in which it is first established that she is dying, Colonel

Skeffington, addressing Dr. Gordon, delivers a powerful tribute to her: 'When she passes, how much passes with her - a whole way of life; a way of gentleness and honour and dignity - these things are going, Henry, and they may never come back to this world'.

When Parris, as the new doctor of the town, has to make his moral decision about what to do about Louise and Drake, the conflicting influences are starkly there. On the one hand, he can follow Dr. Gordon along the path of repression and perpetuate the past tyranny: Louise will be committed; Drake will remain in ignorance. On the other, he can act with 'honour and dignity' and face rather than repress the problem. As he says to Elise, whenever he had a problem that was too big for him, he would consult his grandmother. And so, in making him see what he must do, Elise is acting in place of Madame von Eln as the voice of (European) reason.

The question of class comes into focus in the relationship between Drake and Randy. Theirs is a common situation of small-town melodramas: he's from uptown; she's from downtown (the other side of the tracks). When, nine years after they swung on the rings as children, Drake and Randy re-meet, she says to him: 'You never did come back to Elroy's Ice House'. And although this is partly to remind the audience who Randy is (although top-billed, Ann Sheridan does not appear until this scene, over an hour

into the movie), there is also the social point: what Randy means is that Drake never returned to her part of town to see her again. They start going out together immediately, but Drake continues to see her at first as a girl from across the railroad tracks, someone to take buggy-riding and have a good time with. (Earlier we saw him doing the same with the Ross sisters.) Louise, by contrast, was the sort of respectable middle-class girl a boy of his background married.

Drake needs to be educated away from his class-bound perspective, a process which the film shows as not a little traumatic. Thanks to a thieving bank president (more small-town corruption), Drake loses all his money and, to avoid becoming a tramp, he goes to Randy's father to ask for a job on the railroad. And, although it could be argued that having to work is good for Drake, he himself does not seem very happy with his lowly status. When Randy tells him he's up for promotion, he replies 'Twenty or thirty years like that and I'll be somewhere'. Here the film is registering ideological tensions: Drake needs to prove himself as a worker to be fully accepted into Randy's world; Drake is too ambitious to sustain such a role. Significantly, his accident eliminates the problem. After Gordon has butchered Drake, the film's priori-



ties necessarily change: Drake's rehabilitation becomes the over-riding concern. Randy's insistence that they should marry, Parris's advice from Vienna - now backed up with a scientific understanding of Drake's problems - all become part of the project to help Drake recover his psychological health. In particular, Parris advises Randy to find a way to start Drake working again; a plan which she executes with finesse. She reactivates an old interest of Drake's in a real estate project and, although he's now financing a 'homes for the workers' project rather than his original 'homes for the rich' one, it is significant that he is no longer a worker, he's a capitalist.

A further feature of the film's indictment of the middle class at the expense of the working is that Gordon's two victims, Mr. Mackintosh and Drake, are both living down by the railroad tracks, i.e. in the film's terms, both are working-class. That Gordon should only take his revenge on Drake after the latter has lost all his money and become a worker seems significant here: as if another thread to the revenge were Drake's lowly class position.

Given the malignancy of the two doctors, it is essential that both die. Parris's moral vacillation over what to do about Drake and Louise represents the last moment at which the old, corrupted middle-class order holds sway over the younger generation: once Elise has made Parris realise what he must do, the trajectory of the movie is towards an exhilarating liberation from the past; the throwing aside of years of vicious repression. It is perhaps only to be expected that the melodrama should become excessive here: the sense of triumph is so strong.

*Kings Row* contains a number of themes which became commonplace in the '50s small-town melodramas: the destructive pressures of social class, in particular the gossip and censure of middle-class moralisers; small-town sadism and corruption; the oppression of the younger generation by the older, here specifically articulated through a father/daughter relationship in which the father represses the daughter's sexuality; the family as a breeding-ground of neurosis. But in a number of these respects the film goes far beyond any of the '50s works. Its championing of European cultural influence at the expense of American is also quite exceptional: I can think of no other Hollywood film which adopts an equivalent perspective. The film is also highly sophisticated in its articulation of motifs, in particular the use of different sites within houses to suggest a malevolent power structure and the young people's passionate attempts to combat this.

In discussing the film, I have said little about imagery. In fact, the film is typical of Menzies' work, full of rather static and self-conscious deep focus compositions: the work of a talented art designer rather than a film director. Nevertheless, there would seem to be a pattern to some of this imagery, e.g. Menzies' penchant for foregrounding such objects as coffee pots and kettles tends to occur in contexts where the underlying subject of the scene is death. The associations accumulate steadily throughout the film. In the first example, which is the last scene between Parris and Dr. Tower, the subject they can't talk about is Madame von Eln's imminent death, and the *mise-en-scene* shifts to foreground the coffee pot as Tower

shifts to change the subject. When Parris does finally realise that his grandmother is dying, a metal bowl and jug on a table in the bathroom are framed in the left foreground and the deep focus composition extends through the open door of the bathroom across Madame von Eln's bedroom to the door opposite, through which first Parris and then Anna, the maid, enter. (This shot seems to be self-consciously modelled on the famous deep focus shot in *Citizen Kane*, when Kane bursts into Susan's bedroom after she has attempted suicide and the glass which contained the sleeping draught is framed in the left foreground.) In the scene before Drake's accident, a coffee pot is again foregrounded, and it then 'stands in for' Drake in the subsequent scene of the accident, being pinched by the train's wheel much as Tod, Randy's brother will later describe Drake as having been pinched. By the time of the final use of the motif, when Parris asks Col. Skeffington his opinion on Louise's accusations, the association has become explicit. For the line 'Son, men have often killed other men who were after their daughters', the film cuts to a foregrounded kettle, with Skeffington and Parris behind. And this shot seems like a conscious reference back to the use of the coffee pot in the first of these scenes: Parris's response, half to himself, is 'Murder' and one feels strongly that it is Tower he is thinking of, not Gordon.

These examples may seem a little 'heavy-handed', but they indicate the thought Menzies gave to imagery: *Gone with the Wind* (1939), which he also designed, has much the same sort of self-consciousness of effect. *Kings Row* was made entirely in the studio, which meant that every aspect of its design could be carefully controlled. James Wong Howe mentions further that Menzies would even specify which lens he wanted used, and that the sets were designed precisely to his story-boarded shots: 'if you varied your angle by an inch, you'd shoot over the top'.<sup>11</sup>

The contributions of Menzies, Wong Howe and Wood were undoubtedly highly productive, but the person with the greatest influence over the film's underlying project was undoubtedly Casey Robinson. Although the source of much of the film's subversiveness lies in Bellaman's novel, it was Robinson who found ways of preserving that subversiveness in the finished film. Hall Wallis was a strong producer, but he was not particularly committed to films which adopted a critical stance towards America, as his subsequent project, the nauseatingly patriotic *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), makes clear. As for Sam Wood, he would later be involved in organising the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals. Indeed, one feels that, if he had grasped just how profoundly anti-American *Kings Row* really was, he would have been appalled. Robinson, by contrast, was a brilliant scriptwriter, whose works - especially his films for Bette Davis - consistently display a highly radical edge: see also Andrew Britton's article on *Now, Voyager*. And he certainly did know what he was doing. Interviewed in 1977 in connection with a conference in Melbourne which paid tribute to his work, he referred to 'the American small town, which I destroyed in *Kings Row*'.<sup>12</sup>

11. James Wong Howe: as at 2.

12. Casey Robinson on *Dark Victory* in *The Australian Journal of Screen Theory* 4 (1978).



# Male scrutiny, Female resistance

THE CHAPMAN REPORT

by Richard Lippe



Laura Mulvey uses the term melodrama to signify a narrative that is centred on the female and overtly equates woman with sexuality.<sup>1</sup> The melodrama investigates the crisis of the heroine trying to express sexuality and find a sexual identity in a male-dominated society. Cukor's *Heller in Pink Tights* is a discourse on female sexuality that utilizes certain aspects of a generic mode allowing potential for the heroine to express an active identity, since the western genre is based on action (although this is usually associated with the central male protagonist). *The Chapman Report* is also a discourse on female sexuality but, unlike *Heller in Pink Tights* which has the advantage of displacement through generic conventions and the cover of being a period piece, it addresses the issues in terms of contemporary society, which produces a series of problematics for the material and Cukor's treatment of it.

In part, *The Chapman Report* has an inherent problem in that it is based on Irving Wallace's sensationalistic best-selling novel which is literally premised on a male investigation into

female sexuality, using a Kinsey-like sex survey format.<sup>2</sup> This problem was compounded in that the bogus framework served to raise 'controversial' issues, in particular frigidity and nymphomania, causing the studio censorship fears. Although censorship was beginning to relax in the early 1960s, the studios were still uncertain about the treatment of such subject matter and the public's reaction to it in a film. Finally, *The Chapman Report*, which was produced by Twentieth Century-Fox but released by Warner Brothers, was subjected to a series of editings which resulted in the released version omitting scenes Cukor felt were crucial.

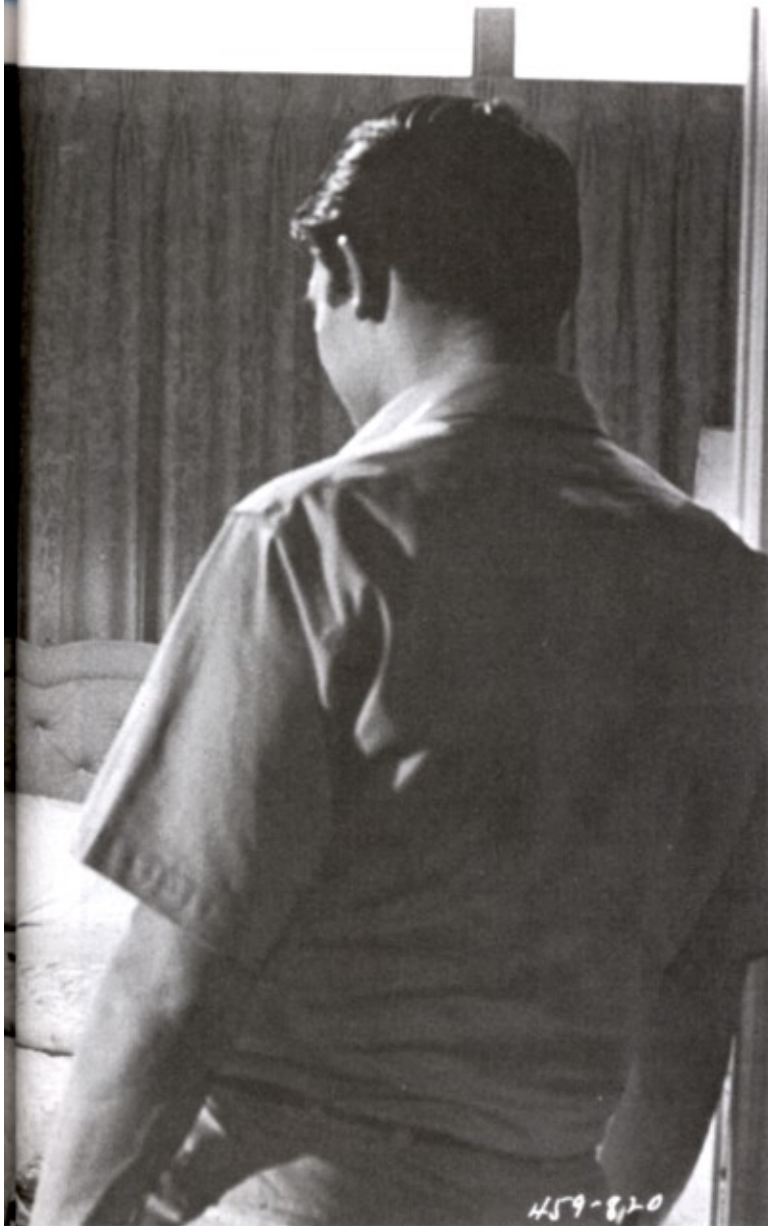
Cukor, in print, claims self-imposed censorship cuts were

1. Mulvey, Laura, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*," *Framework* 15/16/17 (Summer 1981), pp. 12-15.

2. Wallace, Irving, *The Chapman Report*. New York: Signet, New American Library, 1960.

3. "Interview with George Cukor", interviewed by Overstreet, Richard, *Film Culture*, No. 34, Fall, 1964, pp 1-16.





Claire Bloom/Naomi's progress — (1) afternoon seduction (with Chad Everett).

made by Fox even before a public preview; Darryl F. Zanuck, ignoring the favourable preview response, drastically re-edited the entire film; Warners restored some of the footage Zanuck deleted but made their own cuts.<sup>3</sup> Censorship cuts involved Claire Bloom's footage, especially in a scene where she is gang-raped and begins, after attempting to resist, to abandon herself to the experience. The interview scenes, which Cukor considered the strongest element in the film, were tampered with by having the long, sustained takes on the women broken down into a more conventional shot/reaction shot editing pattern (thereby shifting the emphasis from the woman to the man's point of view). A number of long important emotional scenes played by Jane Fonda and Bloom were cut, making some of their reactions seem incoherent; and, while Cukor conceived the Fonda narrative as central, Glynis Johns's minor comic narrative, which was the least damaged by censorship and re-editing, came to be more important than intended.

It is apparent that the studios panicked over the film Cukor shot, despite the fact that conventional resolutions had already been imposed on the narratives in the original conception. Yet, while *The Chapman Report* is a compromised and flawed work, it still retains a considerable amount of interest in the presentation of the four women. In particular, Cukor's treatment of Kathleen's/Jane Fonda's frigidity and Naomi's/Claire Bloom's nymphomania can't be easily assimilated into a male 'point of view' — 'deviant' sex objects — because their sexual identities are placed in a social perspective shown to be dominated by a male conception of sexual behaviour which is used in the service of male needs and gratification. To an extent, Cukor is able to subvert the narrative's imposed identification with the male as investigator/controller through Fonda's and Bloom's strong and intelligent performances which make them much more than 'fantasy' objects, and by having the male characters either expose fears about their identity or by showing them to be oblivious to their ego-centred concepts of male sexual identity. Again, in *The Chapman Report*, not only is the narrative concentration on the female protagonist but Cukor is working in rapport with actresses who have more talent, personality and appeal than their male co-stars, making audience identification with the male protagonist less strong.

In such instances, Cukor's contributions serve to foreground the film's contradictions. Ostensibly, as an ideological project, the film is an endorsement of contemporary bourgeois marriage, suggesting it is a desirable 'norm'. (The survey reveals 87% of the women interviewed are happily married.) Yet, in the four episodes, the women's marriages are either disastrous (Kathleen, Naomi) or lack fulfilment (Teresa/Glynis Johns, Sarah/Shelley Winters). The institution isn't questioned, but, instead, is shown to produce defiant or 'abnormal' behaviour, which according to the film, leads to transgressions and possibly, as Naomi's narrative illustrates, self-

destruction. Paul's/Efrem Zimbalist, Jr.'s decision to marry Kathleen is the film's final narrative resolution and it is approved by two male patriarchal figures, Dr. Chapman/Andrew Duggan and Dr. Jonas/Henry Daniell who, otherwise, have been at odds about the value and effects of Dr. Chapman's sex surveys. The marriage, which the film suggests will be successful, is used to indicate that Kathleen has been 'normalized' in both the sexual and social sense. Significantly, the marriage proposal is placed within the film as a response to Naomi's suicide, implying that frigidity can be contained by the male whereas a nymphomaniac can't. Suddenly, Naomi, Kathleen's complementary opposite, is dismissed as always having been doomed. And, while Paul is given some doubt about his authoritative professional position, he is endorsed by his personal response to Kathleen which is meant to be read as her salvation. (Kathleen's recuperation is blatantly engineered. Paul is told she isn't frigid; rather, her admirable premarital virginity was denigrated by





(2) Transgressing the screen (with Efram Zimbalist, Jr.)

an impatient and insensitive husband).

Structurally, *The Chapman Report* inter-cuts the narratives so that the four women's responses to the survey are paralleled. It is obvious from the film's progress that the device was inherent in the original conception, no doubt to reflect the seeming randomness of the survey. Cukor, on the other hand, undermines the apparent arbitrariness of the structure by developing parallels in the interviews and through the chronology of narrative resolutions: Kathleen's and Naomi's interviews, which are conducted by Paul, serve as brackets, and Naomi, the last to be interviewed, is given the first significant narrative resolution. (Technically, the Johns narrative is the first resolved but, as pointed out, this narrative is of least emotional importance.)

Cukor, as already noted, placed particular emphasis on the interviews; the scenes entail comment on the women, the interviewer and the survey itself. In this context, Kathleen and Naomi are aligned not only in finding the experience degrading (which it is, given that the pretentious and pseudo-scientific manner and claims of the survey merely serve to objectify them), but also in their inverse reactions of rebellion

to the interrogation. Kathleen, when pressured to discuss intimate sexual details of her marriage, panics and flees, while Naomi's response to the probing about her marriage failure is to directly confront Paul and deny him the protective anonymity of the folding screen, thereby asserting her own subjectivity. Their 'irrational' behaviour is a response to the extreme guilt they have been made to feel under the demands of patriarchy where female sexuality is still reduced by the male to a series of mutually exclusive identity labels. According to these identities, Kathleen and Naomi manifest the virgin/whore dichotomy which has been constructed to fulfil male fantasies and, in addition, serves as a means of control and domination. (In the 19th Century this dichotomy was premised on morality; in the 20th Century, psychiatry mediates judgement by designating 'normal' desires/behaviour. This is especially true of the American psychiatric tradition which recuperates what is progressive in Freudian theory by promoting psychoanalysis as a tool for producing social adjustment.) These women are judged neurotic and believe this to be true, yet it is their threat to the stability of male control, which is expressed through an intelli-



gence, integrity and emotional honesty when confronted with pressure to submit, that makes their scenes so important in giving the film a feminist perspective on material which, ostensibly, is about the defeat and containment of the four women.

Actually *The Chapman Report* can be read critically so that each of the narratives functions to expose different mechanics of male domination. In each case, this involves some form of humiliation for the woman because of her identity/actions. It is necessary to look at the individual narratives to extract such a reading, since the film's resolutions function to acknowledge the male position of power as positive, thereby making it appear that the entire film is geared toward this end.

As mentioned earlier, the film centres the investigation into female sexuality upon the concept of marriage, which is given the status of a definitive gauge of women's success or failure as sexual beings. This is most apparent in Kathleen's narrative where her acceptance of marriage to Paul is equated with the ability to be a sexually responsive adult person. The implication is that she is no longer the child/woman she has been for her father and first husband; yet, the dynamics of the relationship are shown to be based on a parental basis. Essentially, the narrative illustrates how the Oedipal complex serves as a means by which the male defines the female. Kathleen's identity in her relations with men is shown to be split between fulfilling their conflicting needs, which both assert (lover) and deny (daughter/mother) her sexuality. In each case, Kathleen is placed in a role of subservience to the male ego which designates what identity response it desires from her. Kathleen's fear and denial of her sexual identity is best acknowledged by her need to shift the emphasis from being able to experience sexual pleasure to her ability to 'love'. In the film, this is shown to involve an acceptance of and respect for the male authoritative position by being (as Paul puts it) 'Daddy's little girl', but this demands that she assume a position of maternal plenitude. She denies her adult female sexual identity for her father by indulging him in keeping Boy's (pointedly, the character's name is significant to the failure of the marriage on his part) memory alive so that he becomes their son — the desired son her father never had. In addition, this diminishes her potential accomplishments (the tennis game, the writing and editing of the book) to flatter his and Boy's 'masculine' abilities. This same pattern is present in the relationship with Paul: Kathleen compliments him ('You seem so sure of yourself'); and it is Kathleen who *needs* to make an apology for her justified anger at Paul's intrusion into her privacy. Paul's parental position is articulated in the narrative's concluding scenes where he, in essence, is giving Kathleen the permission to accept a kind of sexual identity — sexuality that exists within the confines of marital obligations. Interestingly, Kathleen's father has disappeared from the narrative and, in fact, is half-heartedly accused of being an oppressive (but well-meaning) parent.

The most telling visual images in the narrative are associated with Kathleen's sense of entrapment: the tight frame in the extended interview take, and the repeated image of Kathleen in hysteria attempting to defend herself against Boy's and Paul's accusation that she isn't 'normal'. Both

scenes are shot with her backed up against a wall in her father's house which prominently displays a woman-as-still-life painting.

Like Kathleen's narrative, Sarah's is expressly concerned with the sexual/political effect of Oedipal relations on the position of women. Sarah, in particular, is shown to be circumscribed within the confines of being seen as a maternal figure satisfying her husband's need to justify his identity as a responsible male who supports a wife and family. Her sexual identity is also dictated by his conception of sexual needs. In reply to the question about the frequency of their relations, Sarah flatly tells the interviewer 'Saturday comes once a week'. Her attempt to escape being other than a domestic offers her the alternative of being a mistress, where her sexuality is secondary to her function to flatter Fred's/Ray Danton's ego as a desirable male. Unlike her stolid husband, Fred cultivates an image of glamour, creative potential and sexual prowess. In a flashback, it is made clear that he initiates the 'romantic' affair. In fact, Fred secures his position of power over her by making Sarah believe that his wife is the obstacle preventing him from a complete commitment to her. In actuality, Fred also controls this relationship, which is based on his wife offering him financial security in return for the illusion that she is able to 'keep' such a supposedly desirable male who is obviously younger than herself. As in Sarah's marriage, Fred's wife primarily fulfils a maternal need — in this case, trying to cater to her 'son's' conflicting demand to be found desirable, while denying her the right to express this desire. (A similar situation is found in Kathleen's relation with her adolescent husband who asserts that she should be sexual when it pleases *him* so that he can express his sexual needs.)

While Fred's wife is degraded by him, Sarah suffers degradation from both Fred and her husband. When Sarah attempts to make a demand on Fred regarding the value of their relationship, he totally rejects her. The rejection is particularly brutal in that it is staged in a public place — (this is in contrast to the affair, which held 'romantic' connotations, with clandestine meetings and deceptions). The scene succinctly expresses his disdain for and fear of a woman who threatens his security by demanding that her sexual and emotional identity be respected. Sarah, finding that she has no identity outside her husband's house, returns to him to be subjected to being forgiven the transgression because of his generosity — maternal identity in exchange for a home, security and children is the most she can expect to achieve. At one point in the narrative, Sarah aptly identifies herself with Madame Bovary, but ultimately she is denied the dignity Flaubert's character achieves in her final act of rebellion. Of the four major actresses, Winters gives the most muted performance and Cukor invests this narrative with a considerable degree of poignancy relying on Winters' skill in projecting a vulnerability that makes the resolution of the narrative seem especially cruel.

In contrast to these two narratives, Teresa's satirical narrative places less emphasis on the parent/child relation involved in marriage, although it is obvious that Geoffrey/John Dehner sees himself as both indulging Teresa's artistic caprices and, at the same time, channelling



her energies into constructing a cultivated personality which will socially define her as a 'lady' to complement his identity as a 'gentleman'. It is Teresa who realizes that their 'perfect' relationship — 'orderly, civilized, constant' — lacks sensuality and passion. Although her attempt to find an outlet for these needs is treated in comic fashion, with Teresa in pursuit of Ed's/Ty Hardin's muscular beauty (Cukor shoots Hardin in a series of beach scenes that make it clear he is being 'objectified' by Teresa for her, and the audiences', erotic pleasure), the consequence of her endeavour is the discovery that being a 'woman' instead of a 'lady' means physicality but without sensitivity or tenderness. (The beach scenes have a visual metaphor for Ed's crudeness — the pumping oil derricks in the background and next to his house.) Teresa, in retreat from Ed's mauling, abandons her experimentation to be treated as an actively sexual being and settles for Geoffrey's sublimation of the erotic through 'the aesthetic'. Teresa, like Kathleen and Sarah, is also a maternal presence within the marriage. In fact, her initial conscious response to Ed is that she could be a civilizing influence on him, precisely the image of herself that her husband has constructed.

Naomi, unlike these women, has refused to allow her sexuality to be contained within marriage, which makes her narrative the film's most challenging confrontation with woman as sexual being. Given the film's project, Naomi's destruction is inevitable. Yet, Cukor's handling of Naomi and this narrative undermines any dismissal of her disruptive impact. Like

Angie/Sophia Loren in *Heller in Pink Tights*, Naomi asserts her sensuality and acts on erotic impulses; in addition, she, too, contests the bourgeois notion that female sexual activity must be restricted to a monogamous relation within the sanction of marriage. The two women are also similar in that while conveying traditional physical concepts of femininity, they are willing to express their intelligence, independence, and ability to act within a male-dominated situation. For example, in the interview, not only does Naomi deprive Paul of his authoritative position by walking around the screen to produce a direct confrontation; she also abandons the interview questions to give a monologue that becomes a very intimate experience in self-revelation. The monologue offers Paul an intimacy he doesn't want to share, as Naomi reveals the pain, anguish and degradation she has experienced in trying to assert her sexual needs. In a way, Naomi is using Paul in an attempt to liberate herself from the guilt she feels.

According to the dictates of contemporary society, Naomi's aggressive sexual behaviour must be labelled abnormal and she is to suffer degradation for it. Not surprisingly, it is the male who administers this degradation. In Wash's/Corey Allen's first encounter with Naomi, he pointedly identifies himself as a 'stud' through dialogue and posture and then taunts her with 'You look awful hungry, honey.' The brutal gang rape in which he participates is the ultimate way of demeaning Naomi for being 'available' to men. Fred's disdain for, and Ed's brutishness towards, women are fused in Wash's

(3) After the gang rape (with Jane Fonda)







(4) Suicide

treatment of Naomi. (The film's editing sequence underlines the connection between Naomi and Teresa's 'erotic' narratives through juxtaposition — in both, the women are consciously trying to pursue sexual pleasure as an end in itself.)

Naomi's awareness of the degradation she must experience destroys her and the suicide is the emotional climax of the film. Cukor allows Bloom an extended scene in which she gradually confronts the realization that she no longer can accept the guilt, shame and self-disgust she has been made to feel. Naomi's decision to commit suicide is played in silence as she stares at her reflection in the mirror. In a scene that is harrowing in its starkness, she communicates the ravage that has been done to the body and spirit of a woman of integrity and nobility. It was Cukor who cast Bloom in the film, and he has brought out the tragic implications of this character's situation which might have been treated with sensationalist vulgarity by a less sympathetic director.

During this period, the contemporary melodrama, and the Hollywood film in general, move toward communicating a greater sense of verisimilitude, becoming more explicit in language and subject matter, and more preoccupied with the cre-

ation of characters that could be felt more fully to approximate contemporary 'reality'. *The Chapman Report*, like its source material, was meant to be accessible in this sense, reflecting the bourgeois values and pre-occupations found in an affluent, suburban community; yet, the film is conceived on an ambitious scale, with a range of major characters and multiple plots which necessitates a considerable degree of stylization and tight organization.

Like *Heller in Pink Tights*, *The Chapman Report* displays a conscious use of formal elements such as colour, décor, placement of actors within the frame, without producing the sense that these effects are self-conscious directorial efforts which serve as explicit commentary on the material. In this sense, Cukor's work contrasts with such notable Hollywood 'expressionist' directors of the melodrama as Douglas Sirk and Josef von Sternberg, whose use of stylization functions to produce a critical element of distance and ironic counterpoint to the generic demands, nor is Cukor a 'modernist' like Antonioni (*The Red Desert*, 1964) or Bergman (*Cries and Whispers*, 1972) where the use of colour draws attention to itself and functions as symbolic. Rather, Cukor's use of stylization is more subtle



since it is used in the service of narrative demands, Cukor's primary concern being his actors' potential to bring the emotional identity of the character to the surface and to place this character within the existing social reality the film reflects. For example, *The Chapman Report* lacks the sensual colours found in *Heller in Pink Tights*. In particular, this is significant in the presentation of the women in the film who, unlike Angie, are living in a conformist environment which represses sensuality by imposing oppressive codes of decorum. The women are dressed in subdued colours and, while the clothing has an elegance, it functions to indicate class status, money and 'taste'. Cukor, in *The Celluloid Muse*, 1969,<sup>4</sup> discusses the colour schema used in the women's dress to comment on their individual personas. 'The costume designer, Orry-Kelly, was very clever about their clothes. One woman wore white all the way through, another wore black, and *you weren't aware of it*.' (My italics.) As the quotation points out, he values this formal use of colour but, also, Orry-Kelly's integration of it into a naturalistic mode so that it isn't obviously apparent as a device. In contrast, consider the jarring red dress Jane Wyman wears in Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) or the confrontation scene between her and Gloria Talbott where coloured filters are used to wash over Talbott's face, further distorting the character's claim to credibility. Sirk's tactic is forcefully to intrude formal elements into what appears to be a naturalistic context to demand the viewer's attention, while Cukor's concern is to articulate the potential of the material without disrupting its narrative flow, letting

comment evolve through character and situation as they are played out. The stylization that is utilized in *The Chapman Report* is never allowed to distract from naturalistic plausibility, yet, tellingly, Fonda is almost consistently wearing white outfits wavering between the overly girlish (the interview) and haute couture (Johns' recital); Bloom wears form-fitting earth-colour clothing; Winters is restricted to sombre navys and blacks, while Johns is most often seen in beiges.

This respectable and discreet form of dress is also reflected in their living environments, which are shown to be well-ordered and unobstructively elegant in furnishing, with neutral colour décor which tends towards cool blues, beiges and dark brown. This emphasis on propriety serves to define, and throw-into-relief, the tensions existing below this glossy and seemingly attractive surface.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the editing pattern of *The Chapman Report* is an important formal element, with the continual cutting from one narrative to another producing a sense of internal pressure on the women to move toward some kind of resolution, given the external demands to account initiated by the interviews. This movement tends to undermine the 'slice of life' connotations usually associated with suburban dramas. (For example, *Strangers When We Meet* (1960), which is also concerned with sexual relations in suburbia, is low-keyed and leisurely paced, striving, in part, to give a 'realistic' semblance of day-to-day existence in such a milieu.) Because of this discontinuity, the film has a wider scope in its implications. The fracturing and inter-cutting of the women's narratives reveals how little these women can relate to each other. Briefly, Sarah and Fred's wife and are able to exchange recognition and share a sympathetic understanding but this is within the context of a confrontation over Fred. Naomi and Kathleen have even less to communicate, being divided as oppositional sexual sensibilities. These women, too, are stifled in human relations because of the societal pressure put on women's sexuality which fragments their identity. Similarly, there is a conscious counterpointing of drama and comedy so that the tragic implications of the issues confronting these women are made expressly clear by abrupt shifts of tone.

It can be argued that *The Chapman Report* has been burdened with certain clichés and structural contrivances that prevent it from being taken seriously. It can also be argued that Cukor, when confronted with the limitations involved in this project, should have sufficiently distanced himself in a Sirk-like manner to subvert the project by using generic elements and conventions ironically to critique the characters and the world in which they exist. To argue this is to misunderstand and under-estimate the commitment, in particular, Cukor makes to the film's female characters. *The Chapman Report* is a personal and intelligent film, offering a considerable amount of insight into the contemporary oppression of women. It antedates by at least ten years Hollywood's conscious attempt to deal with feminism.

4. George Cukor, interviewed by Higham, Charles and Joel Greenberg, *The Celluloid Muse: Hollywood Directors Speak*. New York: Signet, New American Library, 1969. pp. 61-78.

5. Gene Allen was responsible for the film's production design. Allen discusses his working relationship with Cukor in "A Mirror of the Mind", Lasell, Michael, *Movieline*, March 1990, pp. 52-56.



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# Ever in Our Hearts

BARBARA STANWYCK

by Robin Wood

One of a number of benefits of spending six months of last year in San Francisco was my discovery of the film programming on American television, which makes our own Canadian equivalent appear miserably unimaginative and impoverished in comparison. True, the commercial channels offer little difference. The pay-TV movie channels, however, are both more numerous and more adventurous: more (and more intelligently planned) foreign movies (e.g. a virtually complete retrospective of Louis Malle), and otherwise inaccessible Hollywood 'classics' which had hitherto been mere legendary titles, such as *Ah, Wilderness!* and *On Borrowed Time*. One channel offers, as a regular feature, reasonably literate documentaries on the careers of major stars (during my six months, Rita Hayworth, Robert Mitchum,



*Ever in My Heart*



Montgomery Clift) accompanied by substantial retrospectives (at least half-a-dozen films of each).

The two most remarkable channels (as far as the film enthusiast is concerned), however, are included without extra charge in the basic cable 'package': AMC and TNT. The former (American Movie Classics) shows Hollywood movies twenty-four hours a day uncut, un-'colorized', and without commercials. The latter, the Turner channel, though plagued by commercials and, on occasion, the horror of 'colorization', is perhaps the most remarkable of all. Its features include regular 'birthday tributes' to MGM stars living and dead, so that one is offered a whole day (and night) of Joan Crawford movies, Jean Harlow movies, Hedy Lamarr movies, Clark Gable movies.... Even more impressive (and of inestimable value to the film scholar) are retrospectives covering an entire week (and not necessarily restricted to MGM movies). During my stay I was able to catch up with about half-a-dozen Garbo movies I had never seen, including several 'silents', almost always in superb prints. I suppose there are cogent reasons why these channels cannot be made available in Canada but I am ignorant of what they might be. They are helping to keep alive, as a vital presence within the cultural tradition, our century's richest manifestation of collaborative creativity. Anyone who has tried to teach classical Hollywood to today's students will know how fragile the links have become.

The highlight of all this, for me, was TNT's 'Barbara Stanweek' (sic), during which over 30 Stanwyck movies were shown, spanning her entire career. Of the greatest interest, of course, were the little-known '30s movies and especially those from the 'pre-code' period. These alone would provide material for a lengthy article, which it is not my intention to write. I offer merely a few brief and tentative comments.

Predictably, the interest of the films is very uneven. From a pre-code standpoint, *Night Nurse* (with its explicit depiction of upper-class degeneracy, alcoholism and promiscuity, and its hero and his 'friends' who literally get away with murder), *Illicit* and *Baby Face* stand out. But I think the alleged 'freedom' of pre-code Hollywood has been greatly overestimated: ideologically, the films are really no more subversive than hundreds of post-code movies. Sexual licence can be presented more overtly, but its conventionally moralistic chastisement operates as firmly (if often as unconvincingly) as in later films. Thus *Illicit* offers, for most of its length, an explicit denunciation of marriage as an institution, but at the end Stanwyck is forced to accept its necessity. And in the notorious *Baby Face*, in which she literally sleeps her way, floor by floor, to the top of a business corporation, she is punished not only by poverty but by a monogamous relationship with

George Brent. One can certainly point to the blatant hypocrisy of these conclusions, which fly in the face of narrative logic, but precisely the same can be said of thousands of post-code 'happy endings'. If the vitality of these films derives to some extent from the relative freedom, its most immediate source is Stanwyck herself.

For me, the revelation of the series was *Ever in My Heart* (1933), a film I had never heard of and almost didn't watch: it appears to have no reputation whatever, is credited with no shock-value, and offers only Ralph Bellamy and Otto Kruger as counterpoise to Stanwyck (Kruger is in fact magnificent, Bellamy his usual decent self in the usual Bellamy role). The film contains very little that could be perceived as specifically 'pre-code' (Stanwyck and Kruger sleep together — discreetly, off-screen — after they are divorced), but to me it is a far more 'shocking' film, in the wider sense of that term, than *Baby Face*. It is one of those Hollywood films, quite rare in my opinion, whose excellence cannot be attributed to a single source (*Casablanca* and *Now, Voyager* are obvious examples) but must be explained in terms of a happy confluence of circumstances. The screenplay is by Bertram Milhauser, who also co-authored the story: it is a name with which I was not previously familiar. The director is Archie Mayo, whose credits suggest a studio employee ready to tackle anything, a competent professional rather than a distinguished artist. Stanwyck is splendid (was she ever less?), but she is not essential to the film in the way in which Davis is to *Now, Voyager*. She surely had the greatest range of any Hollywood star (who else could have encompassed *Stella Dallas*, *The Lady Eve* and *Double Indemnity* with equal assurance and credibility?) and her inimitable fusion of strength and vulnerability works beautifully in *Ever in My Heart*, but the film is very far from being a 'star vehicle' in the manner of *Queen Christina*, *Mildred Pierce*, or *Anastasia*. One may hazard that it is a film whose material called out the best in (Stanwyck excepted) minor talents. Mayo had already directed Stanwyck in *Illicit* two years previously and it is a film to which the term 'competent professional' seems fully adequate. But the mise-en-scène of *Ever in My Heart* abounds in small felicities. Most striking, perhaps, is the brief sequence of the death of the couple's son Teddy. Hugo (Kruger) is trying to sing him to sleep, and sends Mary (Stanwyck) to bed to get the rest she desperately needs. There follows a long-held close-up of Mary in bed, her eyes closed but clearly still just awake; Hugo's voice comes from off-screen. The song continues a while, and then the voice falters and breaks down. The camera remains on Mary and her facial reactions as the implications of this penetrate her consciousness. When she gets up and goes to the door of the child's





*Ever in My Heart*, with Otto Kruger: the song.



*Ever in My Heart*, with Otto Kruger: *Liebestod*.

room (the first cut), the camera pans away from her reaction to her child's death to an open window, the night sky framed by net curtains stirring in the wind. This final image is repeated in the film's last scene, the echo movingly evoking the film's overall sense of loss and desolation. One can scarcely doubt that Stanwyck's most distinguished films were directed by Capra, Hawks, Sturges and Sirk (I suppose one must grudgingly add Wilder, through *Double Indemnity's* misogyny is a serious obstacle). *Ever in My Heart* belongs high in the second rank. After several viewings it strikes me as, not a masterpiece, but a sketch for a masterpiece — the masterpiece it might have become if it had been half-an-hour longer and directed by Frank Borzage, the name that comes most readily to mind in relation to the material.

'Sketchy' is indeed a word one might apply to the narrative, though a more neutral one would be 'elliptical'. The extreme economy — the film seems pared down to the absolute minimum for comprehensibility — works very well much of the time, but there are also times when the viewer feels called upon to supply too much from her/his imagination. Why, for example, does Mary fall in love with Hugo at first sight? If one wishes to see it as more than a mere inert plot convention, one can say that she is harassed and taken for granted by everyone in her home (even the servant/cook), and that everyone (even the gardener) assumes that she will marry nice safe familiar cousin Jeff (Ralph Bellamy) with whom she has grown up; so that the instant attraction to Hugo is explained in terms of her romantic desire for otherness, and for rescue from routine. The text justifies such a reading but the realization is, at best, perfunctory.

The most seemingly arbitrary step in the narrative is the death of Teddy, from an unspecified illness. Again, one can fill in: the first world war has broken out, Hugo, as a German, is ostracized or treated with active hostility, the family are



under siege, and one may presume that Teddy's morale has been lowered, his sense of security and identity undermined, perhaps by the same boys who, in the immediately following sequence, stone the family dachshund to the verge of death (so that Hugo has to shoot it to end its suffering). But one can't say that this is 'done' in the film, and there is the sense, here and occasionally elsewhere, that the viewer is being left to do the filmmakers' work for them.

It seems necessary to say, at this point, that *Ever in My Heart* raises again, in an acute form, the problem that I raise in my discussion of *Understanding Bliss* elsewhere in this issue: how do you write responsibly about a film the reader is most unlikely to have seen and may never get the chance to see (it is never screened, and is not even available on video)? If we really love movies (as opposed to being scholarly or theoretical about them) we must always resent the critic who gives away the plot and thereby robs us of our initial pleasure (the pleasure of repeated viewings being necessarily different). Yet the distinction of *Ever in My Heart* lies primarily in the startling audacity of its narrative development and especially its uncompromising ending, and there is no way of discussing this without giving away far more than is desirable. You have been warned!

Pace the neo-formalists, the great forward stride of criticism during the last three decades remains the introduction of concepts of ideology, which has exposed whole layers of meaning that had hitherto existed and functioned only in the realm of the unconscious (both of viewer and filmmaker). It has also made possible — and legitimized — the formulation of meaning in terms which would have been impossible for the filmmaker. (The recent denial of the prime significance of ideology by the neo-formalists must be regarded as dangerously retrograde, a typical by-product of the dominant '80s ideology, and strenuously opposed). We can formulate the subject of *Ever in My Heart* thus: a woman trapped in, and ultimately defeated by, the masculinist concepts of patriotism and nationalism. Its effect, whatever the conscious intention, is to call those concepts into question from what we would today define as a feminist viewpoint. (In a stroke of profoundly depressing irony, the screening of the film I watched was interrupted by a commercial advertising a \$5. coin commemorating Desert Storm, 'our finest hour'. Presumably no one responsible noticed the irony: after all, a Hollywood movie is 'just entertainment').

The film's rigorously logical but continuously surprising narrative (I was quite unable to predict where it would go next) begins as a piece of comfortable and reassuring small town Americana and culminates in a *liebestod* that evokes both *Seven Women* and *Eye of the Needle*. The apparent endorsement, in the first third of the film, of the values of American democracy — goodhearted generosity, acceptance, tolerance — most strikingly in the sequence of Hugo's acquisition of American citizenship, is set up to demonstrate the fragility and precariousness of those values, their readiness to transform themselves almost overnight into the most vicious cruelty. It is his treatment by the Americans who welcomed him with open arms that provokes Hugo's understandable but equally negative decision to leave for Europe and fight on the German side.

If the film strikes one as partly unrealized, such a stricture does not at all apply to the closing scenes. What is most remarkable about them, however, is that they exist at all, within the context of Hollywood narrative convention. Mary, divorced from Hugo, tentatively reunited with Jeff, joins the Women's Auxiliary and serves in France near the front lines, with Jeff as commandant. She discovers that Hugo has infiltrated the regiment as a spy and has acquired knowledge of troop movements that he will pass the next day to the enemy. It seems to me that three endings are possible from this point, within the framework of Hollywood narrative codes:

1. Jeff will recognize Hugo and denounce him; Hugo will be shot, leaving Jeff and Mary free, the traditional construction of the 'good' heterosexual couple, guarantee of the future of American 'normality'. This is a not uncommon narrative strategy in films 'uncomfortably' centred on women: the woman is abruptly marginalized, the narrative reduced to conflicts between the males. (*Something Wild* is a recent example.)

2. Hugo is shown to have degenerated into a figure of evil, and Mary will grasp at last what a terrible mistake she made in marrying him. (This ending is actually signalled in an earlier scene between Stanwyck and Bellamy). Mary can then 'do the right thing' and denounce Hugo herself, without causing the audience undue discomfort. Another common strategy, most frequently associated, not with a male character, but with the 'ambiguous' *film noir* woman, whose ambiguity is abruptly resolved in the last reel so that the narrative can be purified of her presence.

3. Hugo himself will 'see the light', grasp that he can't betray Mary's country and countrymen, and die in battle, fighting on the American side.

The extraordinary power of the film's ending (which I shall not reveal in detail, though the reader may deduce its essentials from what I have written) depends upon its rigorous and uncompromising rejection of all these cop-out possibilities. I shall note simply that its most 'shocking' moment, from the viewpoint of American patriotism, is Mary's obviously sincere declaration that she would have accompanied Hugo to Germany if had asked her.

As well as relating thematically to certain of Borzage's films of the '30s (*A Farewell to Arms*, *Little Man*, *What Now?*), *Ever in My Heart* is a prime instance of 'melodrama' in its literal sense (melos and drama). The entire film is structured upon the song ('Du, du, liegst mir in Herzen') which Hugo translates for Mary and which becomes their declaration of reciprocal love, as well as giving the film its title: 'You are ever in my heart, you are ever in my thought. You make me many sorrows. You will never know how much I love you'. The melody haunts the soundtrack of the entire film, the words are at several key points referred to by the couple, their full significance only revealed in the final sequence, the poignance of which is intensified by another musical repetition: 'Morgenrot', the song Hugo is singing to Teddy as the child dies, is taken up by Mary as Hugo, in her arms, waits for the dawn and the world grows dark.

Sketchy as its narrative sometimes is, *Ever in My Heart* is a film of real distinction and integrity, building to one of the most devastating conclusions in Hollywood cinema.





*Understanding Bliss*, Bryan Hennessey and Catherine Grant

## Understanding Bliss

by Robin Wood

Of the dozen or so films I saw in the Festival (the most I can absorb over a period of ten days), William MacGillivray's *Understanding Bliss* is certainly among the most distinguished, a return to form after the disappointment of *The Vacant Lot*, assured where the previous film was hesitant, complex where it was merely confused. I want to use its appearance, however, first to raise some pressing critical problems that no one seems to want to discuss, perhaps for the simple reason that they appear unresolvable.

About two years ago I contributed to *CineAction* a long and fairly detailed analysis of MacGillivray's *Life Classes*. If any article I have written deserves the description 'labour of love,' that one does. I had the feeling that (prompted by Peter Harcourt's account of MacGillivray's earlier films) I had discovered a work of rare fineness and distinction, a perception that repeated viewings have given me no reason to retract. The aim of the article was to communicate my love of, and draw attention to, a film that received only the most limited exposure and little critical recognition. I have the impression that almost nobody read it. (I should add hastily that I do not assume that anyone is under the least obligation to read anything that I write — that is not the point. I am thinking here of people who I know follow most of my work, including personal friends and some members of the *CineAction* collective. I must register, as a memorable exception, a student in the last university course I taught who actually quoted from it in class — not, I think, to flatter me, he wasn't that sort of student.)

There is a very good reason for this, and one that I not only

sympathize with but share: almost nobody read the article because almost nobody had seen the film. The relevant issue here is the basic difference between the critic and the reviewer: the reviewer writes for people who have not seen the film, the critic for those who have. A review is no more than a matter of recommendation (see this, avoid that), and in most cases a very dubious basis for a decision. Criticism assumes dialogue and discussion, even if it remains, on the reader's side, silent and internal: the critic offers an interpretation and evaluation that invite the reader's assent, dissent or qualification. I almost never read articles on films I have not seen, where this internal debate cannot take place. (Neither, for that matter, do I read reviews beyond the first two or three sentences. As one cannot go to everything, one is to some extent at the mercy of the reviewers, but before I see a film I want to know as little about it as possible, and I find my own interests — in certain directors, certain actors, certain genres — a far more reliable guide than a thumbs up or thumbs down in a newspaper column or on TV. Besides, most reviews are determined more by fashion than by critical intelligence, and one swiftly learns how to read them: if one has seen, say, *Blood Simple* and *Barton Fink* one knows precisely how to interpret eulogies of the Coen Brothers, and if you're familiar with *Blue Velvet* and its critical reception then neither *Wild at Heart* nor its acclaim will offer the slightest surprise.)

Various questions arise from this, of which the first (from my own personal viewpoint) might be, 'Was I merely wasting my time and energy (not to mention quite a lot of space in the



magazine)?' The only way to answer this in the negative involves a certain leap of faith. *Life Classes* will never get much public exposure and will never be a commercial 'hit,' but it seems to me a film that might survive the vicissitudes of fashion, as works of genuine intelligence and integrity tend to do. (Contrariwise, I suspect that David Lynch is already on the way out and that the Coens will follow him in a few years). This raises the more practical question: where can *Life Classes* now be seen? It might at first sight appear to have become totally inaccessible, and perhaps in most countries it always was. It played for (I think) two weeks in Toronto, and was shown a few times in Canada on pay-TV. It is available on video in a few specialist stores (such as, in Toronto, The Revue and Video Networks). Beyond that, the most one can reasonably look for is the programming by archives and Cinematèques (hopefully not only in Canada), perhaps in the context of complete retrospectives of MacGillivray's work. It is not much, but it is something.

MacGillivray is what is often referred to as a 'regional' filmmaker: the description is accurate but not adequate. That, at surface level, the films are perceived to be 'about' the cultural predicament of Eastern Canada and/or Newfoundland doubtless contributes to their limited marketability (though I think a more decisive factor is their position as low-budget — and quite unpretentious — art-house movies, that is to say they have neither a wide commercial appeal nor the immediately striking aesthetic pleasures of an *8½*, a *L'Avventura* or a *Seventh Seal*). The regional quality is extremely important, as it partly accounts for the inwardness and intimacy with which MacGillivray depicts the specific nature of the characters' problems. Yet the films' thematic — cultural difference, cultural clashes, the conflicting pulls of city and country, technology and primitive simplicity, modernity and tradition, the oppositions never treated simply, let alone simplistically — has a far wider relevance than the term 'regional filmmaker' suggests. One can indicate this by suggesting that *Understanding Bliss* can be read as a reworking (I'm sure entirely unconscious) of the thematic of *New York, New York*: Robert De Niro's 'authentic' jazz is replaced by the Mumpers' Play, Liza Minnelli's status as 'pop' star ('inauthentic' in relation to jazz) by the academic prestige of being an acknowledged expert on Katherine Mansfield ('inauthentic' in the context of Newfoundland culture), Minnelli's rendering of the title song corresponding roughly (though one is a success, the other is a failure) to the lecture/'performance' of Mansfield's story 'Bliss'; both films concern the impossible incompatibility of the couple and the lacerating conflicts to which it gives rise, exacerbated in both cases by the presumption of male egoism, the man so convinced of the importance of his work that he is unable to attribute any real significance to the woman's; both move towards the couple's mutual recognition and regretful acceptance of the impossibility of successful or continuing union. (I am not of course suggesting that the issues in the two films are precisely identical, only that there is considerable overlap.)

Before I saw *Understanding Bliss*, a fellow-critic warned me that I would find it 'chauvinist from both the male and the Newfoundland point of view;' and at MacGillivray's ques-

tion-session after the screening a woman in the audience raised precisely this issue (she had read it in a review). She and I both found this reaction sufficiently remote from our own as to be somewhat baffling, and MacGillivray shared our surprise. In fact, the balance of sympathies is perhaps surer than it is in Scorsese's film. MacGillivray appears to be setting up the performance of the Mumpers' play as the 'answer' to the irrelevance of the reading of (and lecture on) Mansfield, but when we finally reach that performance we find that it is being given in an empty classroom, without an audience. The raw energy of the play and its rendering (by a strongly male-dominated group) is set against the sensitivity and refinement of the Mansfield (both the story itself and its rendering, both by women): the 'irrelevance' to the culture of the qualities the story embodies is clearly presented as the culture's loss, the 'worlds' of masculinity and femininity remaining as separate and incompatible as the debased primitivism of St. Johns and the over-refinement of 'high' culture.

The reviewer in me would like simply to recommend *Understanding Bliss* and leave it at that; the critic in me feels a need to explain why (at least on one viewing) I don't think it reaches as high a level of achievement as *Life Classes*. The richness of the earlier film can be attributed partly to its ability to reach — through the tracing of its heroine's experiences in the various 'life classes' through which she passes — a partial synthesis of its oppositions: by the end of the film Mary Cameron, though she can no longer live in her native culture whose potentials she has far outgrown, still wishes to remain in touch, through the women's line (grandmother, mother, daughter), with all that is finest in its traditions. No one who has seen the film will take this as constituting a conventional 'happy ending': it entails Mary's continued resistance to marriage and the sense that her 'life classes' have barely begun. But it enacts a strongly positive sense of potential and growth, the convincingly felt and realized outcome of the film's overall movement. Nothing of this remains in *Understanding Bliss*: instead of a synthesis, the film moves towards ever-increasing discord, and its predominant tone (despite its overtones of uneasy comedy) is of bitterness and desperation. Between the two films comes *The Vacant Lot* which, unsatisfactory as it is, has a clear enough place in MacGillivray's development. One senses there is a *desire* to move towards a synthesis of the oppositions that structure MacGillivray's work, frustrated by an awareness of the essential barrenness of the culture (the 'vacant lot' of the title) and a sense that all you can do is fly away from it. Perhaps the film's flaws and disjunctures can be read, not in terms of simple errors of casting, but as the product of a painful recognition of a crisis at once cultural and personal. *Understanding Bliss* dramatizes such a crisis far more cogently; **the film seems felt and thought in a way that *The Vacant Lot* isn't. But bitterness and desperation are not fertile soil for the finest forms of art.** Where *Life Classes* moved through and toward a progressive opening of doors, *Understanding Bliss* gives rather the impression of someone beating his fists against the wall at the end of a cul-de-sac.

For all its limitations, however, *Understanding Bliss* confirms my impression that **MacGillivray is the most intelligent of contemporary Canadian filmmakers.**



by Kass Banning

## The Canadian Feminist Hybrid Documentary

*In the complex reality of post-coloniality it is therefore vital to assume one's radical "impurity" and to recognize the necessity of speaking from a hybrid place, hence of saying at least two, three things at a time.*

Trinh T. Minh-ha<sup>1</sup>



Since Jane Marsh's *Women are Warriors* called the house-bound Canadian women to (industrial) arms by dissolving images of domestic appliances into images of factory pistons, since Beryl Fox took her television crews into those dark psychic and physical places of the sixties in *Summer in Mississippi* and *The Mills of the Gods: Vietnam*, since the late 60's women's movement spawned the first generation of "out" feminist filmmakers documenting women's lived experience with a breathless immediacy, since the more stylistically mediated hybrid documentary form of the 80's emerged, Canadian women have been forging documentary films.



*Speak Body* (1979) by Kay Armatage



As this rather schematic rendering, spanning some fifty years, suggests, the genealogy of films by Canadian women begins with the documentary. Its importance cannot be underestimated: it has provided the bedrock — on both a developmental (individual) and historical (institutional) basis — for the future evolution of Canadian feminist filmmaking. Many filmmakers (especially in English Canada) gained valuable experience cutting their teeth on documentaries in the 60's and 70's and have evolved to produce feature films in the 80's and 90's, Anne Wheeler, Brenda Longfellow, Gail Singer, to name but a few. Recent developments, the growing interest in and general seductiveness of producing *narrative* feature films, or the current proliferation of younger women kick-starting their careers by making more formally innovative films, rather than "straight" documentaries, has not, surprisingly, undermined the significance of the documentary. They have, coupled with a new theoretical awareness, however, influenced the actual *pro-*

*duction* of feminist documentaries: a shift, a formal accommodation has taken place which has resulted in a more hybrid product. Development, however, has remained uneven, due to the difference of particular groups or regions — attesting to the fact that Canadian women's film production does not comprise a linear progression.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of these "accommodations", the documentary remains a vital feminist film form. There are numerous reasons for this, but the most significant is documentary's extensive history, both outside and within Canada. The 60's feminist documentary, like its predecessor — the political documentary, for example — related the goals of a specific social movement at a specific historical moment. Feminists assimilated the strategies of earlier social movements, made them their own, and took up the documentary form as a tool for consciousness raising:<sup>3</sup> to elaborate, in filmic terms, the modalities of female experience — in all its corporeal, psychic and political/social registers.

Documentary's function of embodying the political agendas of the times pre-dates the 60's expansion of what was considered political. Since the 20's documentary has served a broad range of various political and social movements which shaped film as a useful organizing tool for debate and

1. Judith Mayne "From A Hybrid Place: An Interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha", *Afterimage* vol. 18 #5 (Dec.1990), p. 7.

2. I have explored the larger question of Canadian women's filmmaking practice in two earlier articles. See "From Didactics to Desire: Building Canadian Women's Film Culture" in *Work in Progress* ed. Rhea Tregebov Toronto: Women's Press, 1987 for a history and analysis of the feminist Canadian avant-garde, the works of Joyce Wieland, Patricia Gruben and Kay Armatage, in particular. See "Surfacing: Canadian Women's Cinema" in *Cinema Canada* (October 1989) for a comprehensive overview of Canadian women's cinema.

3. The shortcomings of the commonsense derogatory reception of the term "consciousness raising" are aptly debunked by feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis: 'The fact that the expression "consciousness raising" has become dated and more than slightly unpleasant, as any word that has been appropriated, diluted, digested and spewed out by the media, does not diminish the social and subjective impact of a practice — the collective articulation of one's own experience of sexuality and gender — which has produced, and continues to elaborate, a radically new mode of understanding the subject's relation to social-historical reality. Consciousness raising is the original critical instrument that women have developed toward understanding, the analysis of social reality, and its critical revision. The Italian feminists call it "autocoscienza", self-consciousness, and better still, self consciousness.' (*Alice Doesn't: Feminism Semiotics Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984, p.82.)



social action. The documentary was thus used to bring about social change on many sides of the political spectrum, from both the right and the left, from both the state and groups on the margins. Allegiances, however, were not always strictly consistent. The dazzling propaganda films of Nazi Germany's Leni Reifenstahl, for example, forged a perfect match of state and right wing interest.<sup>4</sup> Not all state-initiated documentary movements, however, were necessarily fascist. The British Free Cinema movement (to which both John Grierson and Humphrey Jennings made contributions) and our own National Film Board of Canada attempted progressive agendas. The NFB's propaganda efforts to ensure solidarity with the war effort, for example, were single-minded, but hardly fascist.

The left documentary impetus runs roughly from the Soviet state-initiated Lef group to the 30's Film and Photo League newsreels to the works of Pare Lorentz and Paul Strand, to the American new left politics of the American Newsreel collective in the 60's. Methods varied from Dziga Vertov's dazzling pyrotechnics in *Man With a Movie Camera* (1924) to the Photo League's ability to get films edited and screened to workers quickly to Newsreel's guerilla tactics, which were essentially propagandistic, aiming to promote through *vérité* style the events of sixties radical movements spearheaded by feminists, Black Power, and anti-war forces. Feminist documentary filmmaking could be viewed as evolving out of a left politic, but it has expanded into a broader based, revised conception of the political as it was formulated in the 60's, attesting to the notion that documentaries could be political on different fronts in different ways.

During the past decade, however, Canada's documentary production has radically widened its range, and most dramatically, its constituency. The growing proliferation of feminist documentaries, and films produced by women generally,<sup>5</sup> indicates a profound shift in authorship. The gender expansion is complemented by a recent parallel development: the emergence of works produced by women of colour.

The late 70's helped spawn a feminist subgenre in English Canada which came to fruition in the 80's — the hybrid documentary film. (With Quebec feminist film practice, however, issues of language and formal preoccupations, characterized in the bodily free-play of *écriture féminine*, have prevailed since the 60's, echoing a consistent concern in the Quebecois cultural sphere at large). Influenced by, but not necessarily aligned with the avant-garde, the hybrid documentary also derives from the politics of locality. Committed to a referent, this *mélange*-like practice speaks from experience, and/or particular localities, but material is approached in a less totalizing fashion than the first wave of English Canadian feminist filmmaking which tended to adopt the prevailing documentary techniques (variations of *cinéma direct* and/or more conventional modes) existing

at large. Avoiding both modernism's empty pyrotechnics and the pitfalls of a realist aesthetic, the hybrid composite combines a number of strategies, blending formal innovation and narrative experimentation with information or analysis. While taken up with the immediacy of naming, the feminist hybrid simultaneously puts an essentialist female subjectivity under erasure by problematizing the enunciation of first-person filmmaking — a non-authorial, but critical autobiographical "I" offers a centre or focus to a work, while at the same time destabilizing the possibility of romantic self-expression.

The reasons for this shift in emphasis and style in what could read like a confluence of contradictory impulses are both numerous, specific and now commonplace: 70's theorizing around issues of realism and self-reflexivity, especially debates related to documentary and ethnographic film, most notably the efforts of Bill Nichols, Christian Metz, Annette Kuhn, Steve Neale, Mick Eaton, Elaine McGarry, Elizabeth Cowie, et al., offered new formulations which challenged preconceived misconceptions of documentary and shifted the frames of reference away from truth claims or content analysis to stress the affective power of documentary, focussing on film form and the enunciative apparatus in general. There was also the influence of British feminist film theory, with its stress on negative aesthetics, which was culled in part from prevailing debates around ideology and the post-structuralist decentering of the subject. (The appropriation and cult of Brecht and Godard offered but one applied manifestation, that women's stories had to be told differently.) The enthusiastic reception that British theory received by a select number of American and Canadian feminist academics in the late 70's had the effect of combatting the NFB's hegemonic proliferation of a realist aesthetic, and more strongly, of engendering an abiding belief in the possibility that women could forge their own filmic language — one separate and distinct from a male economy of visual pleasure.

While the influence of British feminist film theory and later American spin-offs were (somewhat) anchored in Canada by the mid-80's, and beginning to impact on the actual production of films, it is important to note the precise nature of that engagement. Accommodation and "creative borrowing" has obviously taken place, but not a wholesale seduction. The British project, as represented in the feminist "theory" film, for example, has never been *fully* adopted or achieved here. Edward Said observes that a transplanted idea or "travelling theory" undergoes a series of recurrent and discernable stages, and is shaped by its conditions of acceptance (and resis-

4. Joyce Nelson's controversial book *The Colonized Eye* argues that there are parallels between Nazi Germany Propaganda films and those initiated by Grierson at the NFB. See *The Colonized Eye* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988) for a compelling argument.

5. It is important to note, as Annette Kuhn and others have, that a woman-centred film has no *necessary* relation to feminism.



tance) and finally is accommodated and transformed by its new uses in a new point in time and place.<sup>6</sup>

In this manner, Canada's context gave rise to feminist works that both accepted and *resisted* "foreign" theory and influences, neither rejecting the new strategies evident in films produced in this "theoretical interlude", nor unabashedly embracing them. The reasons for this are largely institutional, ideological, and again, historical. Unlike their British models, Canada's film institutions, such as the NFB or the CBC, are not generally interested in films that push the boundaries of normative documentary form. Nor does Canada benefit from such forward-looking institutions as the BFI or Channel Four. In spite of such obstacles, hybrid feminist documentaries were and are produced that both explore issues and are formally engaging. Institutions, like the Canada Council, have had to accommodate and support what Peter Woolen has aptly named "films with no passports".

In hindsight, the radical merits of self-reflexivity evident in critiques of realism promulgated by feminist film theory were not largely adopted in feminist documentaries of the late 70's and 80's. Given the dearth of local theoretical debate at that time, it is doubtful that this lack of interest was due to a willed disbelief in the inherent political nature of formal experimentation. I believe this wariness stemmed from a consideration of issues which were activated in relation to questions of audience — a concern that stems from the Canadian documentary's double legacy in the Griersonian tradition and the women's movement. In the end, the contradictory pull of our Griersonian legacy — the will towards responsibility instead of passion — kept us from abandoning the social and forging a practice that I believe, is unique to this locality. The results are uncanny films, complexly situated imbrications that offer both a libidinal and a political engagement, both social experience and the pleasures of spectatorship. They offer alternatives that provide an unprecedented nexus, combining fact and fiction, but not imposing a resolution. As such these films are neither avant-garde nor realist, embodying a situated, but poetic, knowledge that negotiates the inbetween. Three films under examination, Kay Armatage *Speak Body* (1979), Brenda Longfellow's *Our Marilyn* (1988), and Midi Onodera's *Displaced View* (1988) will offer three paradigms for examining the feminist hybrid documentary. The films selected here for discussion, do not, of course, represent the breadth of Canadian feminist documentary practice: the works, however, do offer a range of strategies specific to the hybrid category. To consider more works in detail would be beyond the scope of this article.

Although dissimilar stylistically, these works do share some defining characteristics of the subgenre, specifically modes of address. All three films utilize the first person, though this is not an authorial 'I' used in the usual documentary sense as an informational conduit to con-

stitute narratorial authority. Instead, a voice in these instances negotiates a double-edged function — part narrator, part social actor — which suggests interiority or subjectivity. In addition, all three women who authored these films situate themselves, bodily, to varying degrees, within the frame. In this way self-corporeality functions in both a specific — the individuated body and/or voice of the individual imaginary of the filmmaker — and a generalized status, representing femaleness as a totality. In other words, a biographical 'I' suggests a "womanliness"<sup>7</sup>, but does not, at the same time, speak for a collectivity.

Kay Armatage kick-started this practice with her 1979 short *Speak Body*<sup>8</sup>. In fifteen precise shots the film economically and evocatively gives voice to multiple views of various women's experience of abortion, as testimony. And voice, *Speak Body's* primary mode of address, is its structural lynchpin. A rhythmic, almost breathless, rush of female voices conjoin — in a sometimes staccato, sometimes lyrical manner — to give various (and often contradictory) ruminations on their lived experience. Although these cross-cut, sound-looped voices are non-synchronous and mostly disembodied (rarely are we offered the opportunity to directly match a voice to an image of a woman, yet there are conceptual links), *Speak Body* adroitly eschews its normalized effects, distance and objectivity, in its application to documentary practice. How does it do this? The film's insistence on the corporeal is almost visceral: close-ups of the female form recur, at the opening and closing in particular, and there are intermittent shots of torsos through prisms that are both richly textured and sensual. *Speak Body* uses the cinematic apparatus — a combination of minimalist visuals and a polyphonous voice track — to represent interiority. The effect is purely poetic.

Although we never see the women whose voices are heard on the soundtrack, their presence is made manifest through various contextual devices. Their voices weave narrative backdrops to a voice, an "I" whose "story" emerges as dominant; her narrative is afforded privileged identificatory moments, when an image or ambient sound, for example "grounds" or connects with her words. Throughout, these anchoring nodal points concretize meaning and thus create the film's logical through-line. To offer but a few examples: we see a close-up of a woman's hands (the filmmaker's) flipping through the pages of a diary; we hear, among other fragments of dialogue which relate individual discoveries of

6. See "Travelling Theory" in *The World, the Text, the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 227.

7. I borrow this term from Yvonne Rainer's film *The Man Who Envied Women* where the main "character" Trisha, despairs at the innumerable names for the female gender and comes up with the term to represent the notion of femaleness.

8. Considerations of space restrict a consideration of Armatage's later documentaries. *Speak Body* has been singled out here because it initiated the hybrid category.





Brendas Longfellow's *Our Marilyn*



Midi Onodera's *The Displaced View*

pregnancy, "I kept turning the pages back and forth counting the weeks" and we hear her voice softly counting. In a similar set up in the shot that follows, her voice again emerges out of the panoply of voice fragments, "every night after work for the next three weeks I sat at my kitchen table feeling my body changing". Throughout, this same voice functions as both a participant and commentator, moving in and out of the film's narrative space, and becomes a narrator, offering the hard facts of bringing up children in an unequitable society. In this way facts such as "40 per cent of Canada's children are now raised in single parent families. Day care is expensive and there isn't enough of it" seem to motivate the voice to next say "hello" and the woman to reach for the phone with the next line following with some more cold hard facts "all social services are being eroded, the pay scale differential between men's and women's salaries is increasing, not decreasing, support systems generated by the women's movement are struggling".

The basic "movement" of the film, however, is the discovery of her pregnancy, the abortion (which is elliptically suggested, of course, given the lyrical nature of the film) and the feelings (and realities) experienced afterwards. The various "voice-offs" support this main movement by offering additional commentary. As mentioned, these voices sometimes contradict one another. This is especially applicable to memories of the abortion itself. Over the image of black leader, articulations run from "I don't remember much at all, no memory" to "it was quite an incredible experience". Through such means, the playing off of memory and facticity, the suggestion of a female totality is suggested, but it is suggested through difference, through a stubborn refusal to synthesize interpretation or facts about the experience. *Speak Body* accounts for differences of interpretation within a collective frame and incorporates a number of voices without fully assimilating them. Voices blend into a polyvalence, speaking around and to the issue, but side-stepping the trap of "speaking for." And this is accomplished in a fluid, vivid, sensuous style, a style that engages with negative aesthetics, but cannot in any manner be given the charge of anti-pleasure.

Similarly, *Our Marilyn* engages with negative aesthetics; it pushes the limits of documentary form and utilizes multivalent voices, the circling and de-centering of a historical personage, Marilyn Bell, (the 17 year old who, in 1954, "swam" the distance, a record-breaking swim from Youngstown U.S.A. to Toronto, after being refused to swim in a competition with Florence Chadwick, an American contender) but the film is additionally rich in visual pleasure. Two representative icons, our Marilyn and their Marilyn (America's Marilyn Monroe) are playfully juxtaposed, emphasizing the two nations' dif-



ferent mythical constructions.

Like *Speak Body*, *Our Marilyn*'s experiments with modes of address have preeminence, speaking around Marilyn Bell, but not directly addressing her, therefore not assigning her a fixed designation in Canadian history. With *Our Marilyn*, however, the weight of history and draw of myth pull against the demands and delights of narrative, and it is in this to-ing and fro-ing, this dialogic relationship between these elements that the film derives its strength and its uniqueness. Synthesis is unavoidably detained here, but individual imbrications inform and complement one another.

The idea of Marilyn Bell, and the historical event itself, are re-constructed through a variety of techniques. On the one hand, a mix of "official" discourses of information, various media representations, such as newspaper headlines, popular songs of the times, "authentic" radio broadcasts, and archival newsreel footage offer authorial sources. On the other hand, the manner in which a sense of a past self is evoked, in the re-presentation of a historical figure, wildly pulls away from the effects of these documentary conventions. For the third Marilyn, the "I" of the piece, is the fabricated narrator of the film. As investigative agent, she both historically situates Marilyn Bell's swim through her memory and provides the film's through-line; all the elements pass through her. Marilyn, the narrator, begins with "I was named after her..."

Marilyn, I kept all of your clippings, followed all of your successes. There were always two pictures on my wall — you and the other Marilyn, their Marilyn. Somehow these two images kept merging in my mind, your body against the flag, *ad mare usque ad mari* hers against the red satin sheet of a *Playboy* centrefold. Growing up between your bodies I could never decide what was the difference. I'm trying to remember...

The film concludes with "These images tracing memory through my own history, your bodies always moving before me. Growing up between your bodies, never one without the other."

Marilyn Bell's subjectivity, or a level of further interiority (another "I") is achieved through the re-enactment of the swim (with Longfellow herself in the water). Marilyn is bodily re-placed in film's perpetual present; we experience the middle of the swim through optical printing. This distending technique lusciously extends the "middle distance." Versimilitude, or a sense of "being there" with Marilyn is further enhanced by the sound of her panting or the counting or the humming of "O Canada." Ambient sounds, such as the sound of a fog horn or her coach Gus Rider's voice egging her on, coupled with banners of "hang in there Marilyn" further identifies the viewer with her struggle against the ele-

ments, and gives a sense of embodied history.

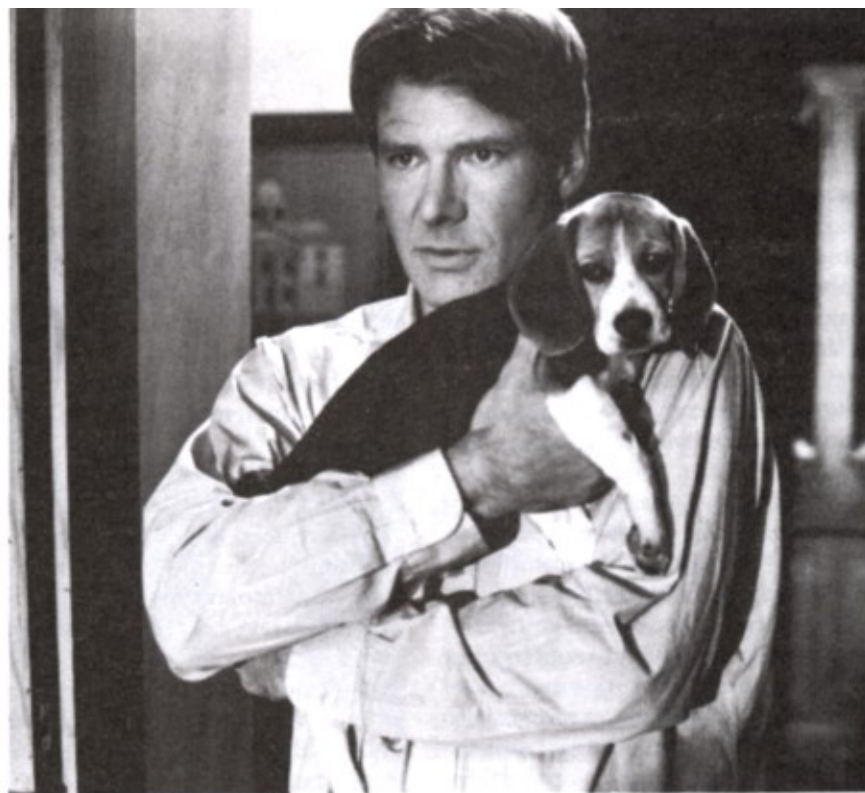
In this way, narrative negotiates the space between the two Marylins, keeps it fluid, swinging between the mythic and the historical. The myths are lovingly sent up, de-stabilized, but imbued with a sense of nostalgia. This sense parallels the narrators; like her, we look back at ourselves and smile at our unsophistication. Yet the manner in which the "story" is re-told, through both public and private memories, facilitates such parallelisms. This lack of synthesis between these elements keeps the film engaging.

Like *Speak Body* and *Our Body*, Midi Onodera's *The Displaced View* utilizes first person narration to invoke a double-voiced discourse. *The Displaced View*, however, lies more in the tradition of the essay or diary tradition, for Onodera plays the "I" of the film. Onodera, as social actor, retrieves a "history lesson" that has been suppressed due to the silencing effects of racism. And the "doubleness" here is representative of differences of language, of Japanese culture, of being two things at once, as W.E.B. DuBois articulated in reference to African Americans. Onodera puts herself "out there"; through her examination of her own relationships with her grandmother and mother, Onodera explores and attempts to understand her own identity. (Although this description could initially read like the "finding oneself", consciousness-raising type of film so prevalent in the 60's, *The Displaced View* does not in any way resemble the sometimes rambling, inward-looking perspective of those times.) Onodera's films is a highly conceived conceptual work, mixing performance, evocative sound and image relationships, and an analysis of the social events, stereotypes, and cultural specificities that shaped Japanese North Americans. Although Onodera and her family are participants with their personal histories making up the raw material of the film, there is no sense that there the film intends a realist depiction.

Part oral history, part minimalist expression, *The Displaced View* succeeds by grafting several identities together; Onodera finds identity through difference. Like *Speak Body* and *Our Marilyn*, Onodera's film uses memory to filter the information; she "makes up the past for you", to fill in the silence. We see images through her voice. "Onodera" within the film investigates the meaning of the photographs, the questions of identity, then poses those questions to her grandmother in person.

All three of these films adopt an experimental polyphonic strategy, intended to oppose dominant forms of representation, and address the cinematic apparatus and its ideological inscription. With *The Displaced View* we witness a return to a more grounded, personal referent, but a return with a difference. The current prevalence of films like Onodera's, from communities previously unheard from in Canadian feminist filmmaking, can only disrupt former prescriptions and shift the terms of debate.





Harrison Ford in Mike Nichols' *Regarding Henry* (1991): the child-man as the paradigm of male consciousness.

## Regarding Men

DISEASE AND AFFLICTION IN  
CONTEMPORARY MALE MELODRAMA

by Viveca Gretton  
and Tom Orman

While certain recent mainstream films such as *Thelma and Louise* and *Jungle Fever* have invited critical readings and elicited responses demanding the public articulation of political positions, many of the seemingly apolitical melodramas released around the same time, such as Mike Nichols' *Regarding Henry*, Randa Haines' *The Doctor*, and Joel Schumacher's *Dying Young*, are in fact no less engaged with questions of ideology and political practice. Indeed, the melodrama itself has long been recognized as a genre in which the sphere of the personal (the family) lends itself as a site for the dramatization of political conflicts. Further, as Thomas Elsaesser has argued, it is a form which tends to emerge during "periods of intense social and ideological crisis."<sup>1</sup> The melodramas that we are concerned with, then, participate in a larger struggle over the representation of issues central to the women's movement, especially in relation to precisely how such issues are displaced by representations of masculinity in popular culture.

1. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," *Imitations of Life: a Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991), p.70

If an action film such as *Thelma and Louise* foregrounds feminine refusal and resistance, masculine

anxiety specifically associated with the loss of power has been internalized in the proliferation of male-centered melodramas released over this past summer which concentrate specifically upon illnesses and afflictions visited upon men both narratively and as metaphor. Feminist criticism has been able to appropriate the woman-centered melodrama by isolating the repressed voice of feminine desire and rage in the reading of certain films, but this recent configuration of the male-centered melodrama, though it purports to renovate masculinity, with few exceptions restores and retrenches white, patriarchal values.

Recently, the male melodrama has shifted away from the strategies that emerged in the melodrama of the late 1970s and early 1980s (*Kramer vs. Kramer*, *The Champ*, *Table for Five*, *Ordinary People*). Indeed, Reagan-era family melodramas reflected male anxiety and resentment over gains made by the women's movement either as simple wish-fulfillment, by excluding women or abolishing them from the narrative, or by presenting them as coldly repressive figures responsible



for an overall disintegration of the family. As a result, the cinematic mother of the early 80s is "almost always an outsider, destructive at worst and superfluous at best."<sup>2</sup> In the male melodramas of the late 80s and early 90s, however, women are once again deemed essential to the survival of the family, and though their absolute exclusion seems no longer warranted, their concerns remain strictly marginalized. Both *Regarding Henry* and *The Doctor* begin with the somewhat more familiar or recognizable representation of the male protagonist as repressive, manipulative, and uncaring towards his family. Illness or injury is the supervening event (quite often the event that opens or precedes the narrative and thus defines its concerns) that radically alters his character and impels him to reassess and eventually to repair his deteriorated family. His wife recognizes this new coming to consciousness as a fulfillment of her own desire and thereafter loyally supports his every effort at what is now a spiritual as well as a physical convalescence. In this way the narrative is structured to allow the male subject to recognize failings within himself pre-emptively, as a means of forestalling any further demands or resistance by women. *Regarding Henry* for instance, recognizes the need for a radical change in masculinity — it needs a shot in the arm (or thereabouts) — but in terms of a textual strategy Henry Turner's wound is actually self-inflicted, a painfully necessary inoculation against any subsequent redistribution of power.

Both *Regarding Henry* and *The Doctor* demonstrate that a shift in values not only benefits the hero's family but also ensures his own personal liberation. This "liberation," however, is discovered as a latent innocence whose reinstitution covertly demands the undivided attention and devotion of women and children, presumes in ethnicity sympathetic spiritual support, and elicits willing sacrifices from a compliant working class. In this way the melodrama of male affliction tends to regiment and mobilize otherness unproblematically in terms of narcissistic masculine need. Both of these particular films are often conveniently categorized as crisis-of-conscience films offering a positive, or at least a sympathetic, response to feminism by pleading for a kinder and gentler masculinity. Yet at the same time they paradoxically suggest that masculinity can be effectively ameliorated only through impairment. Indeed, bourgeois criticism which tends to refer to the "feminization" of the contemporary male hero in these situations ultimately equates the feminine to a paradigm of the castrated male; these melodramas present only a negative feminization, and since the feminine does not exist anywhere within them as a positive term, we are

required to identify solely with the reconstruction of the male subject.

Disease and affliction are, of course, enduring features of the melodrama, although much depends on who is sick, the nature of their illness, and the conflicts which arise as a result of such affliction if the film is to offer moments of resistance or ambivalence in relation to normative values. (For example, the most pressing health crisis in recent memory, ironically enough, rarely figures in mainstream male melodramas, mainly because AIDS and AIDS-related illness cannot be divorced from explicit political issues concerning sexuality, homophobia, education, and the allocation of research funds and health care resources.) Pam Cook suggests that in the woman-centered melodrama the heroine's "desire is often presented as a symptom... her body becomes an enigma, a riddle to be read for its symptoms rather than an object of erotic contemplation."<sup>3</sup> As a result, films such as Goulding's *Dark Victory* (1939), or Sirk's *Magnificent Obsession* (1954) provide moments of resistance to masculine intervention, if only temporarily, by problematizing the feminine body as an object of desire. In recent melodramas such as *Dad*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Awakenings*, *Regarding Henry*, and *The Doctor*, the male body is foregrounded: afflicted and desexualized, its restoration becomes the unifying strategy of the narrative, its teleology. The paradigm of the reunified body not only



Robert De Niro and Robin Williams in Penny Marshall's *Awakenings* (1990). Knowledge and normative values: the afflicted male as emblem.

2. Dave Kehr, "The New Male Melodrama," *American Film* April 1983, p.46

3. "Melodrama and the Women's Picture," ed. Landy, p.254



Tom Hulce and Ray Liotta in Robert Young's *Dominick and Eugene* (1988): male affliction, class difference, and the crimes of the father.



expresses the fundamental narcissistic desires of the text, but also represses the fear such emphasis on corporeal unity is intended to obscure. This is not so much the fear of a violent feminine transgression, but rather the fear of an overt recognition of a more thoroughgoing crisis of male authority.

This is not to suggest that the male melodrama and the subsequent deployment of male affliction in film is intrinsically reactionary. Certain melodramas may, indeed, be "read against the grain" in order to reveal disruptions and conflicts in the narrative that undermine the efficacy of the family. Nicholas Ray's *Bigger Than Life* (1956) presents the family as curative at the level of the narrative,<sup>4</sup> yet the rather abrupt happy ending does little to reconcile the conflicts dramatized by the father's illness, an illness manifested as an obsessive behaviour that culminates in a murderous rampage against

his family. *Bigger Than Life*, in this sense, is a forerunner of Kubrick's *The Shining* as a horrific indictment both of patriarchal values and of the family as a repressive institution. Nevertheless, the current trend in the male disease melodrama is to reinforce the family's curative powers and to recycle "bad fathers" into "good fathers." Indeed, recent cinematic afflictions go so far as to suggest that there are no bad fathers after all, just bad values. While the overall trend is reaction-

ary, there are important distinctions to be made between these films: a film such as Gary David Goldberg's *Dad* (1989) does use disease as a means of reasserting patriarchal values without qualification, but Robert M. Young's *Dominick and Eugene* (1988) refuses to present either the family or the father unproblematically. Even *Regarding Henry* presents a tacit redistribution of power to the extent that Sarah Turner [Annette Bening] must become an independent economic entity as a result of domestic tragedy.

Since the primary feature of so many of these films is their concentration on the tragedy of the afflicted male body and the deployment of pathos around a masculinity rendered suddenly powerless, such melodramas abound in figurative representations of castration manifested either as the disease itself, as a specific medical procedure, or as the relations of power and submission that pertain to institutionalized clinical practices.<sup>5</sup> Illness as castration, as a primal

traumatic moment, is often signified in these films as a sudden loss or disruption of speech. *The Doctor* focuses specifically upon the loss of voice, and *Regarding Henry* emphasizes an agonizing rehabilitation from aphasia. In Penny Marshall's *Awakenings* (1990), a virtual lifetime of catatonia is poignantly signalled by lexical dysfunction, and Jim Sheridan's *My Left Foot* (1989) emotionally dramatizes the emergence of Christy's "voice" as he painstakingly writes the word "mother." Thus, each of these films eventually deals to a greater or lesser extent with the re-empowerment of masculinity in terms of resuming or mastering the power of speech or writing. The temporarily voiceless Jack Mackee [William Hurt], for instance, bullies his wife into acknowledging his need for her by determinedly writing his demand for attention. Yet Haines' first feature, *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), evidences a crucial difference in the traditional deployment of male and female affliction on precisely this point: the deaf heroine, Sarah [Marlee Matlin], refuses to learn to speak, and the central conflict involves her resistance to the masculine intervention of John Leeds [William Hurt], her teacher/lover.

Male-centered "disease" melodramas are often divisible by their use of a coincidentally punitive affliction which results in redemptive effects and insights (*Born on the Fourth of July*, *The Doctor*), and the more traditional deployment of a trans-

4. See Noel Carroll's discussion of the family as curative in "The Moral Ecology of Melodrama: The Family Plot in *Magnificent Obsession*," ed. Landy, pp.183-191.

5. Steve Neale relates castration directly to pathos and emotive effect by connecting the "happily" ending melodrama in which the heterosexual couple are finally united with a pattern "in which the cost of the achievement of the coincidence of points of view and the couple's union seems marked in terms of an impairment of masculinity, male castration." (11) In the films which we will be dealing, however, castration is a premise rather than a condition of narrative resolution. See "Melodrama and Tears," *Screen* Dec 1986, pp.6-22.



Tom Hulce and Ray Liotta in Robert Young's *Dominick and Eugene* (1988): male affliction, class difference, and the crimes of the father.



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*Regarding Henry*, however, derives from elements of both conventions. In *Awakenings*, Leonard Lowe [Robert De Niro] is an innocent visited not only with torments far beyond his deserving, but further and perhaps more importantly, the very nature and intensity of his condition confers upon him the authoritative status of an innate knowledge. The afflicted male is subsequently able to instruct and educate on the rightness of normative values, sometimes merely by being posited as an emblem of their worth. In *Awakenings*, the child-man instructs in the "basic truths" concerning family, love and work. Leonard foresees and facilitates the implied heterosexual union between Dr. Sayer [Robin Williams] and Nurse Costello [Julie Kavner], he assures Paula [Penelope Ann Miller] that her stroke-victim father recognizes her devotion, and finally inspires Dr. Sayer to sermonize on "forgotten values" to a congregation of wealthy hospital patrons.<sup>6</sup>

In Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* (1988), Raymond Babbitt [Dustin Hoffman] is similarly empowered by affliction: his autism confers upon him uncanny powers of calculation which throughout the film enforce and signify his otherness, an otherness that simultaneously partakes of the mystifying banality of ritual and repetition. While his brother Charlie [Tom Cruise] obsessively debates with other characters over the relative value of objects and people, what finally proves to

be of definitive value is the restoration of the Babbitt family. Nonetheless, Raymond proves to be the key to the family history: he is the "rain man" of Charlie's earlier consciousness and represents a dimly recollected affectivity which links him with the maternal.<sup>7</sup> Yet Raymond is more purely emblematic

6. The authority of such knowing must be strictly controlled in *Awakenings* precisely because of the power of the metaphor. The most interesting section of the film concerns Leonard's growing need for self-determination. The film rapidly transforms him into a radical demagogue irresponsibly advocating the values of otherness, articulated within the film only as the increasing psychosis brought on by L-DOPA. Only Leonard's subsequent complicity in the clinical procedure of recording and filming the process of his own deterioration restores him to his previous status as afflicted innocent.

7. The restoration of family values is implicit in the very act of recalling them. Charlie remembers a song he once shared with his brother and also teaches Raymond to dance. Music, the *melos* of melodrama, forms a "system of punctuation" (Elsaesser 74) which is part of a larger scheme of articulation, and in these films it often seems particularly related to the recollection of value. In *Dying Young*, Victor makes significant use of the song "All of Me" (his dead mother's favourite) to manipulate and "educate" Hilary. In *Awakenings* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, a dance becomes symbolic of frustrated desire: Paula's dance with Leonard calms the tremors of his body momentarily, and Ron's drunken dance also emphasizes a poignant sense of loss. In *Dominick and Eugene*, Dominick's dance with the prostitute defers his sexual initiation, while Jack MacKee's dance in the desert with June Ellis is presumably meant to celebrate his spiritual coming-to-consciousness.

Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise in Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* (1988): recollected affectivity as a link to the maternal.







Julia Roberts and Campbell Scott in Joel Schumacher's *Dying Young* (1991): subsuming class difference within the heterosexual romantic couple.

than Leonard Lowe; though he is himself incapable of articulating the home truths that are the ideological concern of the film, as an object of contemplation he demonstrates their essential importance and effectively galvanizes Charlie to begin the reconstruction of his family. What is potentially subversive about *Rain Man* is the extent to which Raymond effectively represents, in psychoanalytic terms, the imaginary scene of identification with the absent mother, even though the film's overt purpose seems to be to reiterate patriarchal values through Charlie. Indeed, it is Raymond's otherness that prevails more convincingly at the end of the film: the family cannot cure Raymond, and though it is implied that

Raymond does, on the contrary, cure Charlie of mis-valuing the paternal heritage, Raymond himself proves unassimilable at the level of symbolic meaning or value.

*Dominick and Eugene* also concerns two brothers and a family secret, though it is even less convincing in promoting the family as curative. Unlike *Rain Man*, in which the recollection of a traumatic incident (Raymond accidentally burned Charlie as a baby) reveals a misunderstood patriarch worthy of posthumous forgiveness (Raymond's banishment by the father was meant to protect Charlie), *Dominick and Eugene* identifies the source of Dominick's permanent brain damage as a particular crime of the father. In fact, the murder



Dominick [Tom Hulce] accidentally witnesses in the film triggers the memory of the crippling attack by his own abusive father. Further, the use of the afflicted innocent as a emblem of normative values is subverted by the film's persistent (if not always coherent) attention to class difference. The desire of Eugene [Ray Liotta] to transcend his working-class origins is complicated by his admitted financial exploitation of Dominick who, by virtue of his affliction, is firmly relegated to the working class in terms of his interests and aspirations.

The traumatic childhood moment in these films emphasizes not only the primal moment of an innocence betrayed, but posits affliction itself as a re-presentation of that original innocence. In *Dominick and Eugene*, the brothers are liberated by remembering, in *Regarding Henry*, Henry Turner [Harrison Ford] is redeemed by forgetting. After Henry's injury, he awakens to a blissful non-recognition of his own acts as a repressive father and husband. In his fortunate impairment he has accessed a state of innocent origin, a priority of being and awareness virtually incomprehensible to his peers. In *Awakenings*, but for moments of drug-induced psychosis and rebellion, Leonard Lowe never really matures either psychically or sexually beyond the boyhood of his post-encephalitic coma. *Regarding Henry* continues in the tradition of *Awakenings* and *Rain Man* by presenting the child-man as the paradigm of male consciousness, and like *The Doctor* it presents the public self of masculine endeavour as an errant or unnatural form of a prior, innocent masculinity. By appending the notion and possibility of a curative affliction, these films are able to locate what is wrong in a physical source within an individual, as if that source were not ideological or ideologically deployed. Henry's brain injury effectively removes his will to power, and while Jack MacKee's throat cancer in *The Doctor* is not a curative in itself, its presence effects the series of simple narrative role reversals that are meant to renovate his character.

Importantly, both Henry Turner and Jack MacKee consciously address themselves to correcting and subduing misplaced values rather than advocating, on the authority of their new insights, a disruption of the subsisting order (such as is briefly attempted by Leonard Lowe during his revolt against hospital authority). Institutions themselves are not questioned, only the individuals acting within them. The reformed Henry Turner attempts to redress his earlier unethical practices by exposing former colleagues. Simplistic correctives are applied in *The Doctor* as well when a reformed Jack MacKee refuses to support Dr. Caplan [Mandy Patinkin], a colleague and close friend named in a malpractice suit. Jack's experiment on his interns, forcing them to live on a hospital ward, is presented as part of his newly enlightened pedagogy rather than the simple extension of his authority.

In *The Doctor*, accession to a prior state of innocence

through illness is more oblique since Jack MacKee never truly sheds his adult consciousness or professional authority. He is "enlightened" nonetheless and derives even further authority for his enlightenment from the example of others, even to the extent of appropriating the pathos and significance of their suffering. A fellow patient, June [Elizabeth Perkins], becomes the chief vehicle and indicator of Jack's renovation, yet her own death within the film is significantly less important than the assurances she can offer to Jack: in a letter presumably written on the eve of her death she reassures him that he not only deserves, but will unquestionably receive the love he seeks.

In *Dad*, affliction reveals a form of benign schizophrenia in the aging father, Jake Tremont [Jack Lemmon]. After recovering from a shock that left him temporarily catatonic, Jake displays a renewed energy and a will to live which is supported by his son and by his grandson as well. More importantly, Jake also reveals his fantasy of an alternate, idealized family at this point, a fantasy that has allowed him to cope for many years with the repression he presumably experiences within his own family. This fantasy is an extreme form of the states of innocence operative in similar disease melodramas, and



Elizabeth Perkins and William Hurt in Randa Haines' *The Doctor* (1991): renovating masculinity and the appropriation of pathos.



Jake's very survival depends upon the continuance of a regressive delusion that must be supported and confirmed by the real family. In a fit of seeming perversity, however, Bette Tremont [Olympia Dukakis] refuses to comply. Her son John [Ted Danson] subsequently convinces her that she in fact is the cause of Jake's misery and that compliance is the price she must pay for years of oppression. Like June in *The Doctor*, Bette's own life-threatening illness (at the beginning of the film) is only significant in relation to the male character, and like Leonard's mother in *Awakenings*, she is summarily dismissed after years of careful devotion.

A similarly blunt projection of guilt onto the mother is performed in Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1990), a film that in its attempt to name and expose ideology is subsumed by it. Ron Kovic [Tom Cruise] willingly and eagerly volunteers for service in Vietnam where he is wounded and paralysed. Initially the film presents American patriarchal values straightforwardly as the underlying cause of misfortune. However, after Ron's return to his parent's home, the conflicts that arise (the film is, after all, a family melodrama) reveal less a challenge to male authority than a desire to re-establish it when Ron, the inchoate spokesman for the disillusioned and betrayed sons of the Vietnam war, turns his wrath on his mother. In a violent displacement of blame and guilt, the paralysed son hysterically demands that his ineffectual father "tell" his mother why *her* ideology is to blame for his present anguish. Scrutiny is thus shifted away from American imperialism and patriarchal law, and settles instead upon the repressive and castrating mother.

Since the family melodrama is understood to present bourgeois values as normative, *Dying Young* effaces the potentially divisive class differences it initially posits. Hilary [Julia Roberts], the film's putative working-class heroine who is paid to care for the rich, dying Victor Geddes [Campbell Scott] restores the decayed Geddes line through a combination of the curative powers of bourgeois domesticity and macrobiotic shopping. Unlike Henry Turner or Jack MacKee, Victor seems to have few discernable faults requiring correction other than the sexual ambivalence of an effete voyeurism no doubt in need of heterosexual confirmation.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Victor's unabashed objectification of Hilary is presented unproblematically: the film requires us to identify with Victor and to endorse his point-of-view as he alternately spies on Hilary and searches for her image in pre-Raphaelite paintings. Roberts repeats her role as the pretty woman whose services are bought by a wealthy man, and who despite her attempts to contractually exclude a sexual relationship (which she insists "is not part of the deal"), eventually succumbs to

her "natural" role as unpaid lover and nurse.

If *Dying Young* attempts to obscure class issues by subsuming class difference within the romantic couple, *Dad* explicitly refers gender to class: Jake describes his wife as a "boss" and himself and a "worker," thereby equating a presumed familial imbalance of power with capitalist exploitation. Indeed, *Dad* proceeds far beyond the mere obliteration of difference between classes that is effected in *Dying Young*. Tremont family politics are a bizarre inversion of the reality of capitalist economic relations, and in *Dad*'s fantasy universe of masculine victimization, it is women who wield ultimate economic and political power.

In the male melodrama of affliction, relations of power and submission are made manifest by institutional or clinical situations, and are even at times pathetically inverted. Nonetheless, the concerns and intentions of a hegemonic masculine ideology that is so firmly rooted in the family often prevail. This is nowhere more apparent than in the presumptions made upon the working-class or ethnic characters who figure so prominently in the hospital drama of the recuperating middle-class white male. In *Awakenings* the desperate need of the afflicted moves an entire staff to donate their paychecks — we are to assume hospital labour to be in such close proximity to voluntary charity as to render such abnegation an economic possibility, just as we are led to expect similar and repeated sacrifices to be elicited by the pathos of bourgeois affliction. The labour as well as the sympathies of ethnic and working-class characters are thus equally mobilized as part of the recuperative gestures that emphasize the spectacle of such affliction. (An isolated departure from this pattern occurs in *Born on the Fourth of July* when a black hospital worker challenges Ron Kovic on these same assumptions.)

Unfortunately, the conservative trend of these current films is not noticeably refuted by other recent manifestations of the genre. Even women-centered disease melodramas such as *Beaches* and *Steel Magnolias*, which focus on women losing other women, are not necessarily progressive. Yet women-centered comedies such as Richard Benjamin's *Mermaids* (1990) or even Mike Nichols' *Postcards From the Edge* (1990) adapt melodramatic elements to a comic resolution and offer tentatively subversive moments: both films centre on the endurance of mother-daughter relationships that neither result in loss or separation, nor depend on a restorative father-figure. Though few genuinely subversive moments seem to be available in the recent melodramas of male affliction, *Dominick and Eugene* offers the possibility for affection between men that does not involve a restoration of the father, *Regarding Henry* isolates moments of ambivalence in Turner's relationship with his daughter, and *Awakenings* hints at the subversion of clinical authority in Leonard's abortive rebellion. Arguably, it seems that the male melodrama becomes increasingly and more successfully subversive as it moves towards horror (*Bigger Than Life*, *The Shining*, *The Stepfather*). Rob Reiner's *Misery*, in fact offers a horrific parody of the clinical rehabilitation of the male subject: while *The Doctor* and *Regarding Henry* end with the male hero cured, renovated, and restored, and with the feminine safely contained, *Misery*'s crippled hero remains ever watchful against a relapse, a return of unapproachable feminine desire.

8. *Dying Young*'s depiction of a young male wasting away is particularly resonant in the age of AIDS although the film over-anxiously tries to distance itself from any connection with the disease. Nonetheless, a film such as *Longtime Companion* (also starring Campbell Scott) is able to dramatize the devastating effects of the AIDS virus and at the same time explicitly refer to the conventions of the melodrama (many of the central characters write or act in soap operas). While *Dying Young* ultimately deploys disease as a politically regressive narrative strategy, *Longtime Companion* resists such mystification by specifically dramatizing a community's physical, emotional, and political battle against AIDS. Further, the presentation of disease in *Longtime Companion* avoids the normalizing strategies of earlier mainstream films dealing with AIDS such as John Erman's *An Early Frost*.





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